

THE ISLAND AT THE DAWN OF POLAND



PHOTOGRAPHY BY SYLWIA PIWOWAR

This quiet island on a scenic lake is actually a place of great historical and cultural significance to Poland. Every stone here bears silent witness to momentous events, and the rustling leaves seem to whisper tales from a time when early-medieval Polish rulers called this island home. Walking the paths of Ostrów Lednicki, visitors encounter traces of the island's early settlers and majestic ruins of tenth-century architecture. Past and present meet, offering an unforgettable journey through history and nature.



Photo 1

The most impressive buildings in the early Piast realm were the stone princely residences. Pictured: a model of the palatium in Przemyśl – part of the exhibition “Early Medieval Rulers’ Residences in Central Europe”



Ostrów Lednicki holds a central place on the map of early-medieval Poland. Today, the island is shrouded in tranquility and lush greenery – but a thousand years ago, it bustled with life as one of the principal strongholds of the first Piast rulers. It is known as the cradle of Polish statehood, and many historians believe it may have been here that Mieszko I was baptized – a symbolic act marking the birth of the Polish state.

Now protected as a historic site, the island is under the care of the Museum of the First Piasts at Lednica. It functions as an open-air museum where the past and present blend seamlessly. Thanks to the work of archaeologists, conservators, and historians, the site comes alive – offering visitors not only relics of ancient buildings but also a deeper understanding of the origins of Polish statehood. Surrounded by the waters of the lake, Ostrów Lednicki forms the heart of the Lednica Landscape Park, where nature conservation goes hand-in-hand with preserving the national heritage.

Back in the tenth century, a vast princely stronghold stood here, protected by massive earth-and-timber ramparts, whose remnants still dominate the landscape. The island was connected to the mainland by two wooden bridges – the Poznań and Gniezno bridges – built around 963–964, with a combined length exceeding 650 meters. Their remains are still visible beneath the lake’s surface, where underwater archaeologists continue to uncover their secrets.

On the island, visitors can explore the remnants of a palace – one of the oldest stone residences of rulers on Polish soil. Built by Mieszko I on a rectangular plan, it was divided into several chambers. The most important among them was the *aula regia* – the royal hall where councils were held, guests received, and subjects judged. Adjacent to it stood the princely chapel, built on a Greek cross plan, with massive pillars and two sunken basins in the floor believed to have served as baptismal fonts. These features have led scholars to suggest that this may have been the very spot of Mieszko I’s baptism – one of the foundational moments in Polish history.

The island also holds the ruins of a pre-Romanesque church with two masonry tombs – possibly the resting place of members of the Piast dynasty. Over time, a large cemetery grew between the sacred buildings, earning Ostrów Lednicki the name “Holy Island.” Walking among the stone walls and traces of former structures, one can almost physically sense the scale of transformation that unfolded here in the earliest days of the Polish state.

Archaeological excavations on the island and in the lake have uncovered thousands of artefacts. The most valuable religious objects are a reliquary of the True Cross, an ivory comb, and a gilded book fitting. A fascinating find is a scallop shell from the graveyard – a symbol of pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. Alongside these were luxury items: gold and silver ornaments, glass beads, amber and semi-precious stones, as well as weaponry – swords, spears, axes, a helmet, chainmail, and riding gear. The collection of arms assembled here is considered one of the largest early-medieval hoards of its kind in Central Europe.

Ostrów Lednicki is not only a symbolic site – it is a real place where history has left behind tangible traces. It was here that key decisions were made, where power and religion took shape, where Emperor Otto III passed on his way to the Congress of Gniezno in the year 1000. Today, the island invites visitors to journey through time and into the depths of Poland’s national heritage. Because this is more than just a place – it is a bridge between past and present.

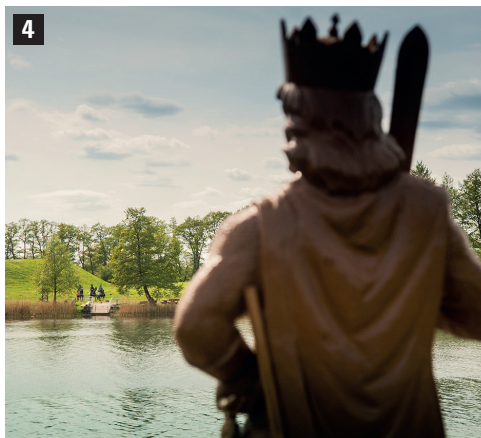
PAWEŁ SANKIEWICZ, MUSEUM OF THE FIRST PIASTS AT LEDNICA



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Photo 2
The main building of the Museum of the First Piasts at Lednica – a treasure-trove of artifacts from the early days of the first Polish state

Photo 3
Ostrów Lednicki is one of the sites considered as the potential location of Mieszko I's baptism – symbolically, the baptism of Poland itself

Photo 4
Sculpture of Bolesław the Brave, facing his fortified island stronghold

Photo 5
Visitors to the island are greeted by the figures of those present at the Congress of Gniezno in the year 1000: Duke Bolesław the Brave, Emperor Otto III, and Archbishop Radim Gaudentius (sculptures by Julian Boss-Gostawski)

Photo 6
Wandering the island's pathways, one may even encounter Mieszko I and his warriors (sculptures by Julian Boss-Gostawski)



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Photo 7
Today, Ostrów Lednicki is accessible by ferry, and the landing area is protected by a palisade and imposing gate

Photo 8
The stronghold was once surrounded by timber-and-earth ramparts, remnants of which are being uncovered by archaeologists both on land and beneath the lake's surface



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Photo 9
A detailed model of the Lednica stronghold in the time of Bolesław the Brave helps visitors step back a thousand years

Photo 10
Symbolic first residents of the palace – the princely couple: Mieszko I and Dobrawa



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Photo 11
The natural and cultural heritage of the island and surrounding area is protected by the Lednica Landscape Park, established in 1988



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Photo 12
The fortified island church held not only stone tombs but also a treasury where relics were kept – including a reliquary of the True Cross



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Photo 13
Tree roots reach deep into the remains of the past – here resided Mieszko I and Bolesław the Brave, and here the very foundations of Poland were laid