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WHAT WAS ON THE EARLY PIASTS' TABLE?

We talk to **Prof. Daniel Makowiecki** of the Institute of Archaeology at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń about what Poland's first rulers most likely ate and how archaeological finds can help reconstruct the culinary practices of early medieval times

What sort of "victuals" did Bolesław the Brave enjoy?

MAKOWIECKI: That's precisely what I investigate as an archaeozoologist – trying to read historical menus off of the animal bones unearthed during excavations. Half-jokingly, I like to claim that after analyzing tens of thousands of animal bones as table waste from the strongholds of Ostrów Tumski in Poznań and Ostrów Lednicki, I've probably handled bones once gnawed on by both Mieszko I and Bolesław the Brave. Of course, I can't determine how a given dish was prepared – but I can say what was eaten and how good the food was. Historians tend to rely either on scarce mentions in chronicles or on retrogressive methods, which attempt to reconstruct facts using written sources from later periods. For me – as both an archaeologist and an animal science specialist – what truly counts are the animal remains actually recovered from early settlements, strongholds, suburbs, and cemeteries. When I determine the age at which an animal was slaughtered, I can also assess the culinary quality of the meat. More broadly, I'm able to reconstruct the cuisine of the time, which was based on natural products – things that were raised, caught, or hunted. The menu was remarkably varied: I estimate that it included as many as 40 different types of meat.

So what dominated the tables of the early Piast rulers?

If we are talking about the Greater Poland region – considered the cradle of Polish statehood – then the answer is clearly pork. And that's regardless of social class: it was eaten by rulers, courtiers, clergy, warriors, servants, and peasants alike. Even in the tribal period, pigs were the dominant livestock in the region. Mieszko didn't change anything – he adopted this model and continued it. In lofty terms, I'd say that pig farming was the foundation of the economic,

military, and social power of the early Polish state. In the legend of Piast the Wheelwright, a tale of Mieszko's ancestor, there's a description of two travelers being served a specially prepared piglet – and it actually matches the archaeological findings. Pork was widespread: pig bones are by far the most common among the remains of animals consumed as food.

Why this meat in particular?

The pig is a highly fertile species – a sow can give birth to even a dozen piglets at a time. Its carcass yields tender, juicy meat, and its growth rate is faster than that of ruminants. Pigs could forage in the forests, feeding on protein-rich acorns, but they were also well suited to being kept in enclosed pens. What's more, their slaughter yield could reach up to 75 percent, compared to just 45 percent for ruminants. If we estimate the average mass of cattle back then at around 200 kilograms, the pig was a highly competitive option. While cattle were the main livestock in other parts of Poland, in Greater Poland the pig was undoubtedly queen of the animal world – chosen for the table more often even than fish.

Speaking of which, did the carp already hold the deep cultural significance as it does in today's Poland?

Absolutely not. The story that carp were introduced that early by the Cistercians and bred near Rybnik belongs more to legend than to fact. We have very strong grounds to claim that it was actually the Teutonic Knights who popularized carp in Poland. They brought with them the know-how, technology, and custom of raising carp in castle moats, artificial ponds, or specially adapted water basins. If carp had held a prominent place earlier, we should easily find evidence of them among the hundreds of thousands of fish remains uncovered at early Piast strongholds and settlements. And yet, its traces are extremely rare

– a few bones in Wrocław, and in Greater Poland just a single one in Gniezno.

So if not carp, then which fish was truly favored?

With a high degree of certainty, we can assume it was pike. It's a fish more attractive for consumption – large, leaner than herring, say, and commonly dried in the wind, then traded across Europe. Archaeological finds contain large amounts of pike bones. Analyses of remains show that in the Piast strongholds of Greater Poland, people ate specimens around 10 cm longer than those consumed in settlements or suburban areas. It was an everyday fish. In contrast, zander, although delicious and eaten as well, didn't become widespread on elite Polish tables until the modern era. And then there's herring – the “silver of the sea,” as it was often called. It was ideal for fasting days and perfectly suited for transport even inland. It swam in large schools in the Baltic, was caught in vast numbers, and preserved in salt. In this form, it was widely traded and generated significant income. The largest fisheries were located around Wolin, Kołobrzeg, and Hel.

We've talked about foods common to both rich and poor. What about dishes served at the royal court?

Certainly, dishes featuring black grouse and capercaillie made their way to the tables of princes, kings, and the noble elite of early Poland. We also find, though less frequently, bones from hazel grouse. On Ostrów Lednicki, we even uncovered remains of a peacock from the eleventh or twelfth century. The bird is associated with Christian symbolism – specifically the Resurrection of Christ – but was also a delicacy enjoyed by nobles. Similarly, sturgeon was highly valued, though its overfishing over several centuries led to a sharp population decline. It never returned to its early medieval abundance. Sturgeon was caught primarily in the Bay of Gdańsk, and seasonally in the Vistula River and its tributaries around June, during the spawning migration. On Ostrów Lednicki, sturgeon accounts for half of all fish remains. I assume it was brought to the tables of Mieszko I, Bolesław the Brave, and the later castellans who ruled over the site. As for caviar, we have no direct evidence it was consumed, but I believe it likely was – because people already then had a strong tradition of not wasting any animal products.

How do we know what different social classes were eating?

Partly through the quantity and type of animal remains found in settlements associated with specific social groups. Overall, the distribution of food resources was not equal. In high-status locations, for example, we find bones of salmon, which was highly prized at the time. In terms of mutton, we see that



SYLWIA PIWOWAR

Exhibition from the collections of the Museum of the First Piasts at Lednica

more lamb was eaten in strongholds than in surrounding areas. Goose was also favored at the Piast court and, from the mid-thirteenth century onward, became popular among townspeople too.

At Ostrów Lednicki, until Břetislav's raid in 1038, fish and fowl – made up a significant share of the diet. This consumption declined along with the island's political importance. In the central part of Greater Poland, where statehood was strong but game was scarcer due to agricultural development, royal hunting rights (*regalia*) were introduced. Not all wild animals were accessible to everyone. Those known as *animalia superiora* – deer, bear, aurochs, elk, and wild boar – were reserved for the lord's table. In contrast, in the then still-forested Lubusz Land, access to such animals was more open. That's why in smaller strongholds and settlements, I find more abundant remains of game mammals.

You mentioned fowl ...

Indeed, fowl was not spurned – there were no prohibitions against hunting birds. Wild duck, heron, cranes, bitterns, and coots were all consumed. Among geese, the greylag goose was especially common. Even members of the crow family – birds that are still often viewed as “villains” in the popular imagination – were eaten.

Did chicken often appear on the table?

Chickens were very small – more like bantams, resembling the wild jungle fowl of Indochina, from which they originally descended. In early Piast-era archaeological layers, chicken bones sometimes make up as much as 80% of all bird remains. This suggests that chickens were the most important domesticated bird at the time. Importantly, they were easy to obtain anywhere. Millet was abundant, but even without it, chickens are quite hardy. They were often used as a form of tribute or tax.

And, of course, they laid eggs. Someone might say that's nothing new, but for an archaeozoologist, it's something to verify. How? Before the egg-laying period, chickens develop calcium-rich tissues (medullary bones) in the shafts of their long bones – tibia and femur – which are later drawn on to form the eggshells. This only happens in female birds that lay more eggs than needed for reproduction. A wild hen typically lays 7–8 eggs, but it is thought that by that time, domestic hens were already laying more than 50 a year.

There was no shortage of food in Bolesław the Brave's times. Archaeozoological research confirms the natural abundance available back then.

What else was considered a delicacy back then?

Bear paw bones turn up quite often in early Piast strongholds. Their presence shouldn't be surprising if we look at later noble-era cookbooks: bear paws prepared with honey were considered a prized delicacy, alongside elk snouts.

Were animals treated in any special way because of their culinary value?

To be honest, archaeological evidence shows this to be an ambivalent issue. On the one hand, animals held a place in the pagan religion of the Slavs and were therefore respected. On the other, they were essential to survival – so they were hunted and eaten. But one sign of respect may have been that no part of the animal was wasted; everything was put to use. A good example is the beaver. Like all aquatic animals, it was considered acceptable during fasting periods. Its tail, or "trowel," was used to make soup; its high-quality pelt was a luxury commodity; and castoreum, a secretion from its scent glands, was used for medicinal purposes. For all these reasons, the beaver was highly valued in its entirety.

We haven't yet mentioned the horse – a creature that springs to mind when thinking about that era. Were horses spared the butcher's knife?

Among domestic animals, the horse was absolutely paramount. It symbolized the ruler's power, wealth, military prowess, and the might of the state. Interestingly, while among other nations horse skeletons are often found in warrior graves, no such examples have been discovered in Slavic lands in what is now Poland – never has a horse skeleton been found buried with a human.

The horse was also a magical animal, used in divination. If a priest led a horse across a field strewn with spears and none were disturbed, it was seen as a good omen. If any were touched, a planned military expedition would be cancelled. Despite this reverence, horses also ended up on the table. It's a topic that provokes heated debate among scholars of early Polish statehood, but eating horse meat in the Piast era was entirely normal. I've found horse bones on numerous occasions with clear butchering marks from when the carcass was divided into smaller parts.

Was the Piast state diverse in terms of fauna?

Not as much as you might expect. The same species are found across all regions of Slavic Poland, though their distribution varies. For example, elk were extremely rare in the Greater Poland region, but their remains become increasingly common the further northeast you go along the Vistula.

At the site where animal remains were deposited at Ostrów Lednicki, only two elk jawbones have been found. In Kałdus (historical *Culm* – modern-day Chełmno), one of the major centers of early Polish statehood, there's a great abundance of them. This shows that even back then, a degree of zoogeographic distribution existed.

With such a wealth of domestic resources, was anything imported from outside Poland?

The natural abundance was so great that there was little need to import food from distant places. Galus Anonymus even wrote that every day at the court of Bolesław the Brave, even "every non-festal day, there were forty main courses laid out (not counting the minor ones) – all supplied not at other persons' expense, but at his own" (trans. P. Knoll & F. Schaer). They certainly didn't lack for food. Archaeozoological studies confirm this picture of self-sufficiency. Imports during the Piast era were rare and mainly included things I've already mentioned, such as peacocks and carp. It's also possible that orcas, which didn't usually inhabit the Baltic Sea, were occasionally caught – individual bones have been found in both Kołobrzeg and Gniezno.

INTERVIEW BY MARIUSZ KARWOWSKI