

*A Concise History  
of Poland*

JERZY LUKOWSKI

and

HUBERT ZAWADZKI



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# I

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## Piast Poland, ?–1385

The Romans never conquered Poland: a source of pride to its first native chronicler, Bishop Vincent of Kraków, writing around 1200, but a nuisance to the modern historian. Since Rome neither subjugated, nor abandoned Poland, there is no widely recognizable Year One from which to launch a historical survey. The year AD 966 has to serve, for in that year the ruler of what has come to be known as ‘Poland’ accepted (and imposed) Latin Christianity. We know as little about this event as we do about anything else that happened during the next hundred years or so. The written record begins to assume substantial proportions only in the fourteenth century. Some eighty years before Bishop Vincent, an unknown clergyman, possibly of French origin (hence his appellation Gall-Anonim, ‘the anonymous Gaul’) produced the earliest chronicle emanating directly from the Polish lands. Archaeological and toponymic evidence, the accounts of foreign observers and travellers, inform the historian little better than the folk memory on which Gall relied to locate the founder of the ruling house in a successful peasant adventurer called ‘Piast’,<sup>1</sup> who had overthrown a tyrannical predecessor, Popiel (supposedly gnawed to death by some very hungry mice), at some point in the ninth century AD.

The later twentieth century has added its own myths. In the forty or so year after the Second World War, Polish historiography was

<sup>1</sup> The label ‘Piast’ was attributed to the ruling dynasty only in the late seventeenth century by Silesian antiquarians. Medieval sources used formulae such as ‘the dukes and princes of Poland’ (‘duces et principes Poloniae’).

wont to depict a 'Piast Poland' whose boundaries were curiously congruent with those of the post-1945 state. This reflected more than an attempt by a deeply unpopular communist regime to legitimize itself by appeal to an original past. It was also symptomatic of a genuine need for stability after a thousand years of a history when borders were rarely fixed, but could contract and expand, twist and disappear within the span of a lifetime, taking in or discarding groups of people some of whom even today cannot wholly decide on their own identity: 'Poles'? 'Germans'? 'Ukrainians'? 'Jews'? 'Belorussians'? 'Lithuanians'?

'Polak' (*polonus*, *polanus*, *polenus* were the commonly used medieval Latin forms) derives from *pole*, plain – the land of the *Polanie*, living in the basin of the middle Warta river, in the western part of modern-day Poland. Some kind of distinct political unit emerged in this area between the sixth and ninth centuries AD, with well-established commercial and administrative centres in Gniezno and Poznań. The primacy of these western lands came to be acknowledged in the thirteenth century with their designation as 'Old' or 'Great' Poland (Wielkopolska, Polonia Maior) – as opposed to 'Little' Poland (Małopolska, Polonia Minor) to the south and south-east. What linked the Polanie to their neighbours and to so many peoples of the great Eurasian plain was language – *słowo* – the word: those who spoke intelligibly to one another were Słowianie, *Sclavinii*, Slavs – as opposed to the 'Dumb Ones' (*Niemcy*) who spoke no tongue intelligible to 'Poles' or 'Czechs' or 'Russians'. The 'Dumb Ones' were mainly from the Germanic world – Saxons, Franks, Bavarians, Lotharingians. In the unceasing border wars of the eighth and ninth centuries, the 'Dumb Ones' took so many Slavic tribesmen captive that their chroniclers were able to more than hold their own in the insult trade: *sclavus* replaced *servus* as the Latin word for 'slave'.

Linguistic community did not mean political solidarity. The Slav tribes of the lands between the Elbe and the Oder were as likely to be in conflict with their Polish/Silesian/Czech neighbours of the east as with incomers from the west. It was only in the course of the twelfth century that these marcherlands were effectively brought under the authority of German rulers. Only in 1157 did Slav Brunabor become German Brandenburg. In 965, the *knez*, the

prince of the Polanie, Mieszko I thwarted a troublesome alliance between the Christian Czechs and his pagan, Slav neighbours to the west by his marriage to Dobrava, daughter of Duke Boleslav I of Bohemia. Conversion in the following year allowed Mieszko to tap into the manpower, military technology and politics of the German Empire in a way that would have been inconceivable if he had remained a heathen. Most of the early clergy who came to Poland were German; Mieszko and his successors were as willing to conclude marriage alliances with the great families of the Empire as with the ruling dynasties of Scandinavia, Hungary and the Rus' lands. They were quite prepared to furnish the emperors with tribute and warriors in return for recognition of their lordship over the borderlands that they disputed with the German marcher lords. Mieszko's marriage to Dobrava was something of an aberration – the Piasts and the Bohemian Přemyslids had too many conflicting interests for family ties to take root.

According to the Arab-Jewish merchant, Ibrahim ibn Yakub, Mieszko had 3,000 heavily armed cavalry and infantry at his call. Even if this is a very flattering assessment (the emperor Otto I, ruling over lands perhaps five times as populous, had an army of 5,000 mounted knights), Mieszko's retinue of warriors was an impressive instrument, which enabled him to annex Silesia from his former Bohemian in-laws. His son, Bolesław I Chrobry, 'the Valiant' (992–1026), deprived them of the burgeoning commercial centre of Kraków and its southern hinterland, extending the Piast realm to the Carpathian mountains. The two rulers brought under their sway the Pomeranian lands between the Vistula and Oder deltas. It was probably Mieszko who founded the port town of Gdańsk around 980 to consolidate his grip on lands at the mouth of the Vistula. Bolesław's western forays, into lands still peopled by fellow Slavs, took him to the Elbe. In 1018, Emperor Henry II reluctantly acknowledged his rule over Miltz and Lusatia, west of the Oder. In 1018, too, Bolesław intervened in Kiev, to secure his brother-in-law, Sviatopolk, on its throne. He was even briefly able to impose his rule over Bohemia, Moravia and much of modern-day Slovakia.

Almost annual expeditions for human and material plunder were essential to the 'economy' of the early medieval state. But Piast

Poland, with a population of probably below a million in lands densely tangled by forests, swamps and heaths, could not sustain such efforts indefinitely. The aggressive reigns of Mieszko II (1025–34), Bolesław II (1058–81) and Bolesław III (1102–38) were interwoven with periods of revolt, foreign invasion, and recovery. Even Chrobry faced serious rebellions in 1022 and 1025. He had to pull out of Bohemia and his successors had to abandon Moravia and Slovakia. His protégé, Sviatopolk, was driven out of Kiev by his brother, Yaroslav ‘the Wise’, as soon as Polish forces withdrew. Mieszko II had to abandon Miltz and Lusatia; he lost his kingdom and his life to domestic revolt. Between 1034 and 1039, Poland may have been without a ruler at all (some chroniclers tried to fill the gap with a Bolesław the Forgotten, but he is just as likely to have been a Bolesław the Non-Existent), as it threatened to disintegrate under the pressures of pagan reaction and Bohemian invasion. Mieszko II’s son, Casimir (Kazimierz) ‘the Restorer’ (1039–58), needed at least fifteen years to stitch his lands back together with Imperial and Kievan help. It was during his reign that Kraków began to establish itself as Poland’s capital: the old political and metropolitan centre of Gniezno was so devastated by the disorders as to be temporarily uninhabitable.

Few, if any, of the Slav tribes east of the Elbe accepted Christianity gracefully. The Polanie and their associated tribes were no exception. Christianity was the price that had to be paid to escape the fate of their more obdurate fellow Slavs to the west, such as the Wends, who kept faith with the pagan ways and suffered one murderous Christian onslaught after another, until they lost their gods, their independence and their identity. Today, between the Elbe and the Oder, some 50,000 Sorbs survive with their language, an ethnic and linguistic reminder that the peoples who lived in these lands were once not German but Slav.

To the bulk of the populace, Christianity brought burdens which only exacerbated those imposed by the ruler’s war bands and garrisons. Bolesław I took his role as Christian ruler sufficiently seriously to be regarded by the young emperor Otto III as his partner in the conversion of Slavonic Europe. In the person of Vojtěch (Adalbert) of Prague, Bolesław furnished Poland with its first, albeit adopted, martyr – in 997 Vojtěch was slain by the



1 One of the earliest surviving Polish churches: the collegiate church of the Blessed Virgin and St Alexis, *c.* 1150–61, at Tum, near Łęczycza, in western Poland.

heathens of Prussia whom the king hoped he would convert. He was canonized two years later. Like Vojtěch, most of the early clergy came from abroad. They were supported with tributes and tithes exacted by a brutal ruling apparatus. A significant native clergy did not begin to emerge until at least three or four generations after Mieszko I's conversion. The deeper Christianization of Poland began only with the coming of the monasteries and friars in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Until then, the Church remained an alien, unpopular institution, foisted on the people by a ruling elite in pursuit of its own political and expansionist ambitions. But it differentiated Poland from its eastern Slav neighbours in one crucial respect. The new bishops, with their dioceses and synods, with their political and economic privileges, with their ties to Rome, came eventually to open a door to the differentiation and variegation of political authority, limiting the ruler's monopoly on power. Further east, the traditions of Orthodoxy and Byzantine caesaropapism were to direct the lands of Rus' along a very different path of political development.

The new institution of kingship which accompanied Christianity found little wider echo. The Polish word for king, *król* – a corruption of ‘Karol’ (Charles, Charlemagne) – reflects its alien character. Bolesław I, Mieszko II and Bolesław II were Poland’s only crowned monarchs before 1296. All faced revolts almost immediately after their coronations (1025, 1026 and 1076). Opposition came not just from the lower orders. Mieszko II was murdered by a disgruntled court official. Bolesław II emulated Chrobry in his forays into Kiev, Bohemia and Hungary; he backed the pope against the emperor in the Investiture Conflict; he was a generous benefactor of the Church – but it was an ecclesiastic, Bishop Stanisław of Kraków, who appears to have headed a reaction among the king’s own notables against his demanding foreign policy. In 1078, Bolesław had him hacked to pieces, apparently for treason, and inadvertently produced Poland’s first native martyr (Stanisław was to be canonized in 1253). Bolesław was deposed, exiled and replaced by his younger brother, Wodzisław Herman (1079–1102). Real power was exercised by the *palatinus*, Sieciech, head of the war bands and of the network of garrison-towns, the *grody*.

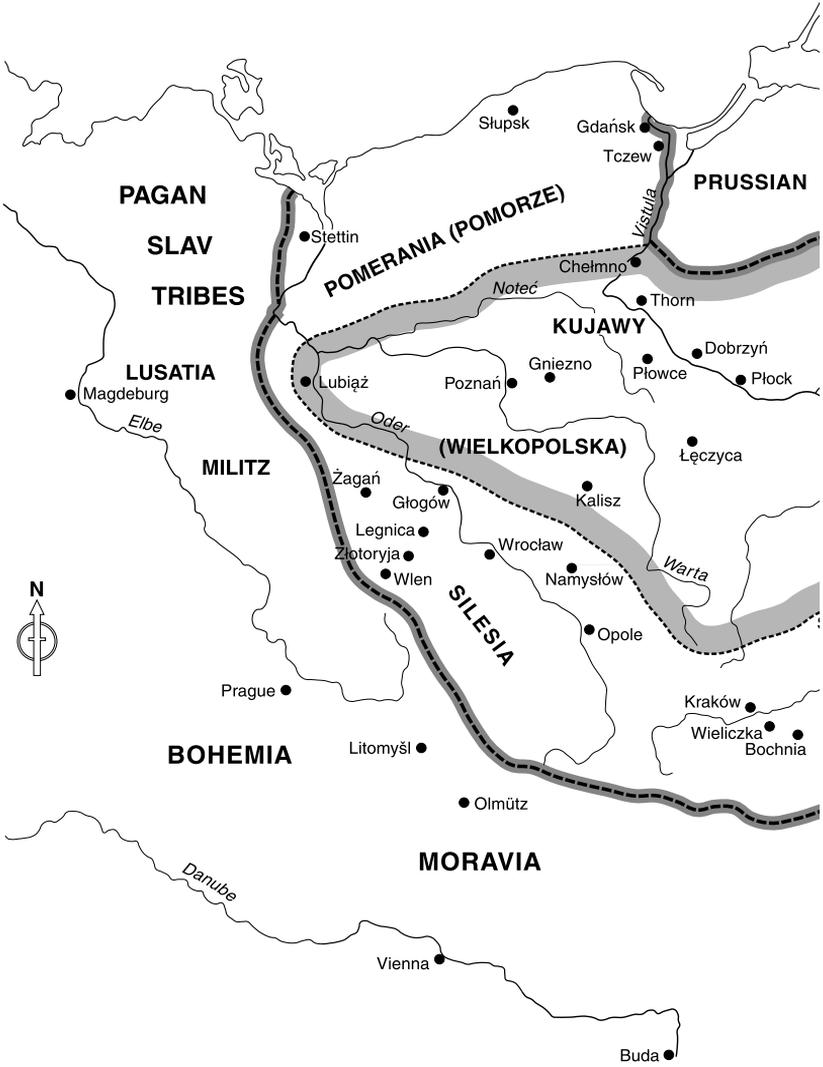
Wodzisław’s elevation highlights a key weakness of the Piast state (though hardly one peculiar to it) – the absence of a secure means of succession. Shortly before his death in 992, Mieszko I placed Poland under direct papal jurisdiction, apparently in the hope that ecclesiastical influence might preserve the rights of his sons by his second marriage to the German princess Oda. Bolesław I settled the matter in his own way: he either exiled his rivals or had them blinded. Bishop Vincent’s chronicle suggests a society in which any form of hereditary claim had to be reinforced with a more general acceptance of the individual ruler: Mieszko’s lineal descendants may not have been wholly assured of their position until the consolidation of Christianity, in the late twelfth century. The presence of a younger brother provided a figurehead for a revolt against Bolesław II; the availability of Wodzisław’s sons, Zbigniew and Bolesław, facilitated revolts against their father and his over-mighty palatine, Sieciech, in 1097 and 1100. When the emperor Henry V invaded in 1109, it was in support of Zbigniew (who also had the backing of the Church hierarchy) against his ruthless younger half-brother. Despite a formal reconciliation,

Bolesław III had Zbigniew blinded and killed in 1111. Bolesław's nickname, 'Wrymouth', may well refer to the ease with which he broke his oaths rather than to any physical deformity. He, too, tried to solve the problem of the succession, this time in more civilized fashion, in his testament of 1138, by a borrowing from Kievan practice: overall political authority would be vested in the *princeps*, the eldest of his five sons. The fertile southern provinces of Kraków and Sandomierz would form the territorial basis of the *princeps'* power, but he would also retain the right to make appointments to all the leading lay and ecclesiastical offices of the Piast patrimony. The younger brothers would be his viceroys in different provinces; the position of *princeps* would always be held by the eldest survivor. This expedient proved no more successful than in the Kievan state. Poland began to break up. In 1202, there were five Piast duchies; by 1250, nine; and by 1288, seventeen, at least ten of them in Silesia. Fratricidal strife inevitably followed. Even in the first, post-Wrymouth generation, the efforts of Mieszko III (ruling periodically between 1138 and 1202 – his nickname was 'the Old') to impose authoritarian rule provoked chronic revolts. In 1177, his siblings, nephews and his own son joined forces to assign the position of *princeps* to the youngest of Bolesław Wrymouth's sons, Casimir 'the Just'. He could still exercise real authority outside his own Kraków-Sandomierz lands, through his patronage of the Church and his power to appoint bishops. As canonical elections increasingly took hold, his successors were less well placed. Kraków retained a prestigious and symbolic role – no one could credibly lay claim to the title of *princeps* without control over it. Casimir the Just and his successors in the principate were, in effect, elected rulers. The idea that the *princeps* should always be the eldest Piast was tacitly abandoned. The position was filled by unanimous or majority agreement among the different Piast dukes. But, ever more, the consent of the Kraków-Sandomierz notables was sought; by the second half of the thirteenth century, the approval of the wealthy, largely German-speaking Kraków urban elite came to be essential.

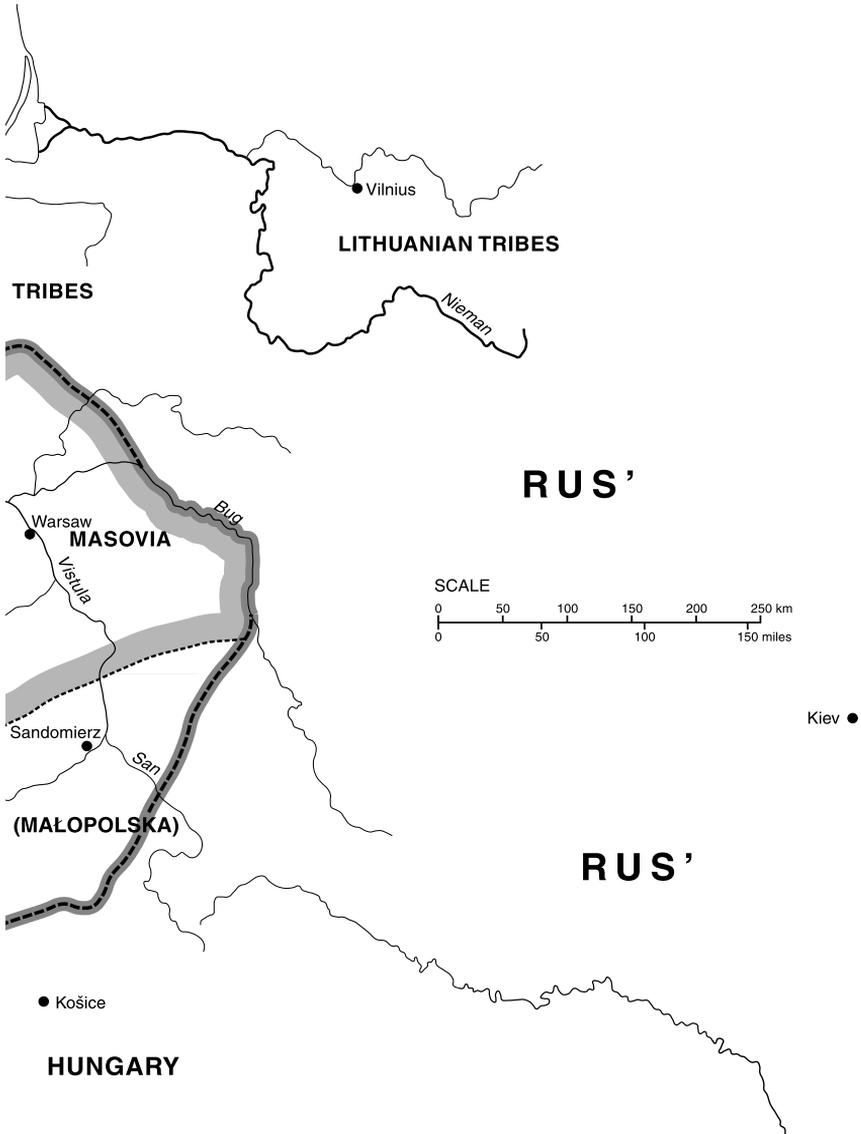
Fragmentation may, paradoxically, have facilitated economic and cultural development. Rulers and their leading subjects had little choice but to expand their resources by intensive means, just

-  Lands ruled by Mieszko I, c. 966
-  Lands ruled by Boleslaw I, c. 1000

Baltic Sea



Map 1 Early Piast Poland, c. 1000.



like the lords of Germany's thinly populated eastern marches. From the early twelfth century, the lords of these territories began to attract new colonists with the promise of collective and individual exemptions from dues and services and the prospect of lighter burdens in the future. The settlement of the east Elbian lands developed into a major enterprise, as entrepreneurs and speculators, *locatores*, looked to enrich themselves by the provision of human capital – migrants from Franconia, Saxony and the Low Countries – to landowners desperate for the manpower without which even the most extensive estates were useless. The ruling elite of the Polish territories were as anxious as their German counterparts to attract settlers, or, as they were styled, 'guests', *hospites* – a recognition of the need to regard them as 'free' men. The *hospites* brought with them new, more compact field systems and technical innovations in the form of mills and heavier ploughs. In 1175, Duke Bolesław 'the Tall' (1163–1201) of Silesia allowed German Cistercians to settle colonists at Lubiąż on the Oder, exempting them from 'Polish law' – they were to remain free from the normal dues, services and burdens which a Polish prince might choose to impose on his subjects. A much more systematic and intensive programme of colonization under 'German law', *ius teutonicum*, was developed in Silesia by Bolesław's son, Henry 'the Bearded' (1201–38). 'German law' meant not the laws in Germany, but the more or less standard package of terms under which colonists from the German lands were settled east of the Elbe and Oder rivers. West of the Elbe, the bulk of the peasantry remained closely tied to their lords – unless they broke loose and made the difficult decision to settle in the east on more generous terms, albeit under harsher physical conditions. When, in 1229, Henry the Bearded began to run out of Germans, he took to locating Polish migrants under 'German law'. Other lords, dukes and ecclesiastics followed suit. There was some compensation – German law actually restricted the terms on which settlers might leave, by comparison with more open-ended Polish practice. By the middle of the fourteenth century, if not earlier, the bulk of the Polish peasantry, including a largely assimilated German element, could regard themselves as in some sense 'free'. But assimilation worked both ways. By the end of the thirteenth century, in central and northern Silesia, the more

fertile areas most attractive to new settlers were becoming German, rather than Polish. By 1300, the once Polish village of Wlen, near Wrocław, had become the German Lähn; and Wrocław itself, to increasing numbers of its inhabitants, was becoming Breslau.

Parallel influences were at work in Polish towns. Most were very small. The largest, Kraków and Wrocław, are unlikely to have numbered more than 5,000 inhabitants each in 1200. This was not enough to generate the wealth that Poland's rulers wanted. Seeking to attract merchants and craftsmen, they looked to the German lands, where, in the course of the eleventh century, more and more towns had succeeded in wresting a degree of genuine autonomy from their overlords: they appointed their own judges, administrators and magistrates. The towns' new status found legal expression in charters of rights and privileges. Magdeburg, the closest significant urban centre to Polish lands, had secured effective self-rule in 1188. Its pattern of an elected or co-opted bench of aldermen, sitting as magistrates, assisting a mayoral figure, the Vogt (in Poland, *wójt*), was to become almost universal in the Polish lands. In 1211, Henry the Bearded conferred Magdeburg law on the little Silesian town of Złotoryja; in 1258, Bolesław 'the Bashful' did the same for Kraków. Judicial appeals and other delicate questions were usually referred to Magdeburg itself for advice and adjudication. Before the thirteenth century was over, around one hundred Polish towns had Magdeburg-style municipal institutions.

The governing classes in these towns were increasingly Germans and German-speaking. Indigenous Polish peasants were forbidden (ineffectively) to live in Kraków, since princes and landlords feared the drain of manpower from their own estates. In Silesia, by the end of the Middle Ages, Polish was the language of the peasantry, although even in the countryside it began to go into stubborn retreat. In larger towns, Germans, or Poles assimilated as Germans, made up a majority. Those most likely to resent germanization were, to begin with, the native Polish clergy, who, as they found their feet, increasingly opposed the intrusion of Germans into their ranks. At the synod of Łęczycza in 1285, Archbishop Jakub Świnka of Gniezno warned that Poland might become a 'new Saxony' if German contempt for Polish language, customs, clergy and ordinary people went unchecked.

The local rulers of Silesia and western Pomerania were particularly exposed to German wealth and culture, whose charms outshone those of an impoverished and backward Poland. It was only towards the later thirteenth century, encouraged by clerics like Archbishop Świnka, that Polish developed enough sophistication to be suitable for the delivery of sermons. As a literary medium, it could scarcely compare with German before the early 1500s. Henry the Bearded of Silesia had enjoyed listening to the fireside tales of Polish peasant storytellers; his great-grandson, Henry IV Probus 'the Honourable' (1257–90) spoke German by preference and was proud to compose and perform poetry and song in the language, a veritable *Minnesänger*. Further east, German communities in the towns tended to be isolated islands. In the countryside, even in much of Silesia, German peasants were more likely to be assimilated by native elements. The same went for German knights and adventurers attracted to the courts of Polish rulers.

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries also witnessed the transformation of the old Piast rulers' erstwhile warrior-bands into 'knights', *milites*, in the western European mould. Those soldiers who obtained enough land and peasants for themselves from their ruler to maintain a warhorse, weapons and armour, or who were sufficiently well placed to take part in the process of *locatio*, came to form a western-European style of military aristocracy. The less well-endowed, the *włodycy*, fell into the ranks of peasants. In principle, the knights held land in return for service (although the kinds of feudal homage ceremonies widespread in France and England were little practised). But as the Piast states fragmented, their rulers found they had to concede immunities and jurisdictional rights to their mounted fighting-men, just as they had had to do to the Church. Those with enough chutzpah and resources simply appropriated these rights, so that by the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, anyone who could plausibly claim to hold land by *ius militare*, that is, any *rycerz*, would exercise jurisdictional rights over it (the terminology hints at the strength of German influences in the thirteenth century – *rycerz* derives from *Ritter*, German for knight). The dukes reserved, at best, the right to hear appeals. As the dukes gave away, or were obliged to give away, their powers of jurisdiction, they found they had to resort to

co-operation and collaboration with their leading subjects. When, in 1228, Władysław ‘Spindleshanks’ (1202–28) issued the Privilege of Cienia to the bishop of Kraków and the local *barones*, according them the right to be consulted at assemblies, *wiece*, which made laws and heard judicial cases, he was formalizing a situation that had been in the making at least since Wrymouth’s reign, in the early twelfth century.

The Catholic Church contributed significantly to the survival of a sense of unity in the Polish lands. Gniezno, given metropolitan status in 999, was able to preserve its ecclesiastical authority over the five other sees of the old Piast state and ultimately to back the programmes of political unification which emerged. After all, the Church itself was one of the chief victims of political disorders. The hierarchy made strong efforts in the thirteenth century to deepen the parish and schools network and to tighten their links to the populace. As the largest landowner after the dukes, the Church had an urgent material interest in halting the processes of political fragmentation – which, in the final analysis, counterbalanced the positive social and economic developments of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The rag-bag of Piast duchies could not hope to aspire to the forceful political role of Mieszko I and his immediate successors. To protect his north-eastern borders against the incursions of still-pagan Prussian and Yatwingian tribes, Conrad, duke of Masovia (Mazowsze) (1202–47), settled the crusading order of the Teutonic Knights on the left bank of the Vistula in 1227. The Poles stood no chance against the devastating Mongol onslaught which wreaked havoc across eastern and central Europe and which swept across Poland in 1241. Perhaps the ablest of the Silesian dukes, Henry ‘the Pious’, was slain at the battle of Legnica on 9 April. Only news of the death of their Great Khan Ögödei caused the Mongols to withdraw from their Polish and Hungarian conquests in December. They remained in the Crimea and in the steppe-lands of the Black Sea and the eastern Balkans, a new and long-lasting menace to south-eastern Poland. Virtually all semblance of orderly rule collapsed in their wake. Dukes became robber-barons, strong enough to aggravate their subjects’ misery, too weak to impose order, let alone unity. Dwarf statelets emerged whose rulers could barely

hold their own against their leading subjects. Who ruled in Kraków was no longer decided by the dukes, but by the barons, clergy and even townsmen of the area. Silesia was disintegrating. The duchy of Masovia threatened to go the same way. The local princes through whom the Piasts had always ruled in western Pomerania had broken loose during the twelfth century. Only the core lands of Wielkopolska and the principate lands of Kraków and Sandomierz remained more or less intact.

The road to even partial reunification was a tortuous one. In 1289, the nobles, knights and the bishop of Kraków chose as *princeps* Duke Bolesław II of Płock, in Masovia. Bolesław transferred his rights over the principate to his cousin, Władysław ‘the Short’ (Łokietek, literally ‘Elbow-High’), ruler of the little duchies of Łęczyca, Kujawy and Sieradz. Łokietek, a princely thug, found that his penchant for brigandage won much support among knights and squires on their uppers. He was quite unacceptable in Kraków, whose townsmen handed over the capital to Henry IV Probus, the Honourable, duke of Wrocław/Breslau. It was Henry who took the first serious steps towards what would be so symbolically important for any reunification of the Polish lands. He began to negotiate with the papacy and with his patron, the emperor-elect Rudolf, for agreement to his coronation. Just before his childless death in June 1290 he bequeathed the duchy of Kraków to Duke Przemysł II of Wielkopolska. Przemysł was already suzerain of the port of Gdańsk and of eastern Pomerania. On paper, he had a stronger territorial power-base than any of his predecessors for over a century. The idea of a crowned head was much more attractive to a more latinized Poland than it had been in the early Piast state. Archbishop Świnka was all in favour: the recent canonization of Bishop Stanisław of Kraków, whose dismembered body had undergone a miraculous regrowth, provided an irresistible metaphor for Świnka’s aspirations. Przemysł’s only serious Polish rival was Łokietek, clinging on in the duchy of Sandomierz. Both men were, however, overshadowed by an ambitious and powerful foreign ruler, Vaclav II of Bohemia.

Vaclav was one of the Middle Ages’ most successful territorial stamp-collectors. His father, Přemysl Otakar II (1253–78) – Přemysl to his Slav subjects, Otakar to his Germans – had built up a

glittering court at Prague. Bohemia's mineral, commercial and agricultural wealth enabled him to support an ambitious programme of expansion, until his bid for leadership of the German Empire came to an abrupt end when he fell at the battle of Durnkrütt on 26 August 1278, against the closest he had to a German rival, Rudolf of Habsburg. The petty rulers of the disintegrating Piast lands looked abroad for protection: one such focus of attraction was the Přemyslid court of Bohemia; the other was its rival, the Arpad court of Hungary. After the death of Henry Probus, Vaclav's own ambition to acquire Kraków was abetted by the local barons and patricians. In terms of security, prestige and economic prospects, he offered far more than either Przemysł or Łokietek. Vaclav secured the crucial support of Małopolska by the Privilege of Litomyśl of 1291. He promised its clergy, knights, lords and towns the preservation of all their existing rights, immunities and jurisdictions; he would impose no new taxes on them and fill all existing offices from their ranks. Łokietek's position collapsed. His unruly soldiery and knightly followers spread alienation everywhere they went. By 1294, he had not only to sue for peace but to receive his own remaining lands back from Vaclav as a fief. It may have been to pre-empt the almost certain coronation of Vaclav that Archbishop Świnka persuaded the pope to consent to Przemysł II's coronation in Gniezno cathedral on 26 June 1295. The machinations behind this decision are as obscure as anything in Polish history; nor is it clear whether Przemysł regarded himself as ruler of the whole of Poland, or just of Wielkopolska and eastern Pomerania. He did not survive long enough to test his real support. In February 1296 he was murdered, almost certainly on the orders of the margraves of Brandenburg, whose territorial ambitions were blocked by the new king's lands. He left Poland one enduring bequest, in the shape of the crowned eagle which he adopted as the emblem of his new state.

The nobles of Wielkopolska opted at first for Łokietek as his successor – but his continued inability to control his own men, his readiness to carve up Przemysł's kingdom with other petty dukes, and a military offensive from Brandenburg drastically eroded his support. In 1299, he once again acknowledged Vaclav as overlord. Even Archbishop Świnka, conscious that the Kraków clergy were

behind Vaclav, accepted the inevitable. In September 1300 he crowned him king – although he could not refrain from complaining at the ‘doghead’ of a priest who delivered the coronation sermon in German.

Unity, of a kind, was restored. Łokietek was forced into exile. His quest for support took him as far as Rome, where he won the backing of Pope Boniface VIII, hostile to the Přemyslids. Vaclav’s last serious opponent, Henry, duke of Głogów/Glogau (1273–1309), nephew of Henry Probus, recognized his suzerainty in 1303. Much of Poland, however, continued to remain under the immediate rule of territorial dukes. Vaclav’s direct authority covered mainly Kraków-Sandomierz, Wielkopolska and eastern Pomerania. He left an enduring administrative legacy in the office of *starosta* (literally ‘elder’). Its holders acted as viceroys in his different Polish provinces, although his preference for Czechs in this role provoked growing resentment. To Vaclav, of course, the Polish lands were simply a subordinate part of a greater Přemyslid monarchy. Polish reunification for its own sake was of little interest to him.

In January 1301, King Andrew III of Hungary died, leaving no male heirs. Vaclav found the temptation irresistible. His attempts to impose his 11-year-old son, another Vaclav, on Hungary and, in the process, massively expand Přemyslid power, was too much for the Hungarians, the papacy, Albrecht of Habsburg and the rulers of south Germany. By 1304 a Hungarian–German coalition had been formed. To gain the support of the margraves of Brandenburg, Vaclav promised to hand over to them eastern Pomerania and the port city of Gdańsk. His supporters in Wielkopolska, already seething at the harsh rule of Czech *starostowie*, could not accept this. Early in 1305, revolt shook the southern part of the province. Those not reconciled to Czech rule would have preferred to turn to Henry, duke of Głogów. Vaclav’s Hungarian and German enemies declared for his exiled rival, Łokietek. Hungarian forces supporting Charles Robert of Anjou’s bid for their throne helped Łokietek seize control of almost all the territories of Małopolska, except for Kraków itself. Vaclav II made peace with the coalition, just before he died on 21 June 1305. He agreed to withdraw from Hungary. But to keep the margraves of Brandenburg on his side, the young

Vaclav III renewed his father's undertaking to cede Gdańsk and Pomerania and prepared to enter Poland at the head of an army. If Vaclav had not been murdered at the instigation of discontented Czech lords on 4 August 1306, he and Łokietek might well have divided the Polish territories between themselves. Instead, Bohemia was plunged into rivalries over the succession, until the election of John of Luxemburg in 1310. In Poland, although the townsmen of Kraków reconciled themselves to Łokietek, most of Wielkopolska preferred to recognize Henry of Głogów.

In 1307, disaster struck Łokietek in Pomerania. The German patriciates of the two chief towns, Tczew and Gdańsk, gravitated towards the margraves of Brandenburg; the Polish knighthood of the countryside remained loyal to Łokietek. In August 1308, the castle of Gdańsk was besieged by the troops of margraves Otto and Waldemar. Łokietek called on the help of the Teutonic Knights. The arrival of their forces lifted the siege of the castle – which on the night of 14 November they proceeded to seize for themselves, massacring Łokietek's men in the process. By the end of 1311, most of Polish Pomerania was in the Knights' hands.

Founded in the late twelfth century as an offshoot of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, just in time to be forced out by Islam's counter-attack against the Crusader states of the Middle East, the Teutonic Knights had relocated their military-proselytizing operations to Hungary and Transylvania. King Andrew II threw them out once their ambitions to carve out their own independent state revealed themselves. In 1227, Conrad I, duke of Masovia, settled them in the county of Chełmno on the Vistula in order to defend his eastern borders against the pagan tribes of Prussia, while he devoted himself to feuding with his Piast relatives. Backed by emperors and popes (the Knights proved adept at playing one off against the other), patronized by the rulers and knighthood of Christian Europe (not least by individual Piast princes), they built up a *de facto* independence. Their most enthusiastic supporters included Přemysl Otakar II (in whose honour they named the new port of Königsberg in 1255), Vaclav II and John of Bohemia. By the late 1270s, they had subdued the Prussian tribes; they could embark on the process of colonisation which gave the area its Germanic character for over 600 years. The Order was also able –

precisely because it was a religious organization, bound by a rule, dedicated to the higher goal of the spread of the Catholic faith and the conversion of the heathen – to organize its territories on lines very different from those of contemporary medieval territories. The Order represented the impersonal state – something higher than a dynastic or patrimonial entity. The command structures of what has come to be known as the *Ordensstaat* were less subject to the whims and favouritisms of individual monarchs. Its Grand Masters were elected from the tried and the tested by an inner circle of superiors who had shown how to combine prayer and aggression, faith and brutality. They and their fellow northern-Crusaders, the Knights of the Sword further along the Baltic coast, in what are now Latvia and Estonia, could suffer setbacks, but, constantly renewed by fresh recruits and enthusiastic part-timers, they could always rise above them. The actual fighting monks, the German Knights of the Blessed Virgin, were, however, few in numbers – this was their weakness. Control of Gdańsk and its hinterland permitted a steady flow of settlers, soldiers, recruits and allies from the German lands. In 1309 the Grand Master, Conrad von Feuchtwangen, moved his principal headquarters from Venice to Marienburg (now Malbork) on the lower Vistula. This was the *Ordensstaat's* new capital, rapidly built up into one of the most formidable fortified complexes of medieval Europe, a mirror of the Knights' power and pride. The fragile entity ruled by Łokietek and his successors could do little more than rail and complain at the Order's perfidy and brutality – but its rulers could not subdue what they had nurtured.

Łokietek had no realistic hopes of recovering Pomerania. Most of Wielkopolska remained alienated. The dukes of Masovia mistrusted him. In May 1311, only Hungarian help enabled him to subdue a major revolt of German townfolk in Kraków. Poles replaced Germans in key positions on the town council, Latin replaced German as the official language of town records. True, it was not many years before German burghers and merchants regained their old influence, but the town itself ceased to be the political force it once had been. The repression did little to enhance Łokietek's appeal to townsmen elsewhere.

In 1309, his rival in Wielkopolska, Duke Henry of Głogów died,



2 The Teutonic Knights' castle and principal administrative seat, at Malbork (Marienburg). Fourteenth century. The castle underwent extensive restoration in the 1820s by the Prussian authorities, who used it as a showcase for the Teutonic Knights' (and, by extension, Prussia's) 'historic mission' in the east.

leaving five young sons, all more German than Polish. The region's knights preferred Łokietek to fragmentation and German rule, but it was not until the submission of the town of Poznań in November 1314 that serious opposition was eliminated. In control of Wielkopolska and Kraków, Łokietek could realistically aspire to the royal dignity – were it not for the rival claims of the new king of Bohemia, John of Luxemburg, who had cheerfully taken over the claims of his Přemyslid predecessors. Most of the Silesian and Masovian dukes looked to him. Brandenburg and the Teutonic Knights endorsed him, in the expectation of satisfying their own titles and claims. Pope John XXII, whose consent was necessary to a coronation in what was technically a papal fief, was reluctant to offend either party. He gave his consent in terms so ambiguous as to suggest that he considered both men to have a legitimate royal title. When Łokietek's coronation did finally take place on 20 January 1320, it was not in Gniezno but, for the first time, in