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FROM THE HISTORY OF POLISH ARCHAEOLOGY STUDIES OF THE BEGINNING OF THE POLISH STATE 1948–1966 (“MILLENNIUM PROGRAM”)

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: historia polskiej archeologii, początki państwa polskiego, badania milenijne

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Situation of Polish archeology in 1945 literally and figuratively resembled a “landscape after battle” (Stobiecki 2007: 106). Due to war military operations, nearly one third of the archeologists had died¹ (Gurba 2005: 257–264) and those who survived, were facing unprecedented problems. They had to recreate museum collections, commence academic education, and prepare research programs; however, they also had to figure out their place in the new sociopolitical reality, forced on Poland through the decision of the Big Three conference in Yalta and Potsdam (change of borders, loss of independence, and communists taking over power). The question about the “shape” of the reviving archeology had taken a key significance. Venturing a generalization of sorts, it can be said that there was a clash between the advocates of the continuation of the tradition of this discipline from the years 1918–1939 who realized the need for revisions of certain outlooks, and their critics who favored a fundamental reconstruction of archeology based on the theory of historical materialism (Stobiecki 2006: 127–156).

At the end of the 1940’s, with the arrival of the Stalinist era, the winning idea was the one advocating for the rejection of the interwar period traditions in favor of establishing the foundations of the new “socialist science” based on

¹ From about 60 archaeologists (about 45 prehistoric and 14 classical archaeologists) working before the Second World War about 21 of them were killed (about 19 prehistoric and 2 classical archaeologists).

Soviet institutional and methodological models. However, certain scientific concepts, despite their pre-war roots, enjoyed unexpected support from the communist authorities guaranteeing archeology an important role in the post-war reconstruction of Poland. One of them was the ethnogenesis of the Slavs and specifically the theory of their autochthonic origin. It assumes an original nature of settlement on the land between the Oder and the Bug at the same time recognizing that Polish 10th century tribes were direct descendants of Proto-Slavic ancestors. Another “politically correct” area of archeological interests were the beginnings or Polish statehood. These two interrelated research topics received attention again at the end of the 1940’s within an interdisciplinary scientific program called “studies of the beginnings of the Polish state” which lasted nearly 15 years.

The action was initiated by the scientific environment (archeologist Witold Hensel (1917–2008) played a pioneering role here) (Hensel 1946: 193–206) and it was conducted as the preparation for the anniversaries of 1966: 1000-year anniversary of the Polish state and the baptism of Poland – hence the studies of the beginnings of the Polish state are popularly called the millennium studies.

Activities planned for various scientific disciplines were aimed at obtaining sources that would shed light on the origin of the country of the first Piasts. Social need for the historical justification of the new territorial shape of Poland caused the millennium studies to focus heavily on “proving the existence of Slavic and proto-Polish roots” of the western and northern territories, propagandistically called the Recovered Territories that were attached to Poland as a result of the decisions made during the Yalta and Potsdam conferences. At the end of the 20th century, the above-mentioned regions formed a part of Mieszko’s I country (first historical ruler of Poland, the founder of the Piast dynasty), but in the result of the complicated 1000 years of history of the Central Europe, long before World War II, to a great degree they were inhabited by Germans. In the context of severe Polish – German conflicts during the interwar period in the fields of science and politics over historical rights to the territories of the Vistula and Oder basins (Gąsowski 1970: 138–162; Kaczmarek 2004: 24–64; Lech 2004: 21–64; Kurnatowska 2007: 37–47), the majority of the millennium researchers regarded studying the described matters almost as their patriotic duty. One of them was Zofia Kurnatowska (1932–2013) who years later wrote (Kurnatowska 1997: 150):

[...] We should not forget that the question of the maintenance and development of the Western Territories after World War II was the matter of life or death for Poland. And this is how it was perceived by the majority of the society in the country and large groups of emigrants. This is why discovering the trace of Polishness on the Western Territories as not a “task commissioned” by the propaganda of the Polish People’s Republic. It was a fully understood and accepted research direction.

In any case, in the 1950's and 60's there were various opinions among important western European politicians according to which the Western Territories were "under temporary Polish rule". In the view of such situation, Polish archeologists could feel the true need to scientifically prove those lands were indeed Polish and consider this proving their patriotic duty.

The millennium program in the years 1949–1953 was managed by an institution called the Direction of Studies on the Beginnings of the Polish State which included: Aleksander Gieysztor (1916–1999, medievalist historian), Kazimierz Majewski (1903–1981, classical archeologist), and Zdzisław Rajewski (1907–1974, ancient and early medieval archeologist). It governed several local offices, so-called Directions of Excavation Works and specialized Workshops: Anthropological, Paleobotanical, Workshop of Historical Sources Editing, Workshop of Prehistoric Atlas, and Inventory of Fortified Settlements. The structure of this institution perfectly illustrates the diversity of tasks that were being carried out within the discussed research project, although excavation works were the primary activity of the Direction. The first ones took place already in 1948 (even before the formalities related to the establishment of the institution were completed). They encompassed archeological sites in 11 localities. Altogether, in the years 1948–1953, archeological studies were conducted on the sites placed in 31 localities (mainly in medieval town centers and fortified settlements that dated back to the times of the Piasts)². Taking into account the fact that the works were carried out by a small number of archeologists, according to the estimations, after World War II there were approx. 24 prehistorians and 12 classical archeologists exercising, the scope of activities was impressive.

Archeological research focused on the Recovered Territories in Greater Poland which, according to historians, was the cradle of the Polish state, and to a lesser degree in Lesser Poland, Masovia, and Central Poland. In 1952, the Direction of Studies on the Beginnings of the Polish State decided to commence working together with Soviet scientists on the question of the so-called Red Ruthenia, which was to expand the collaboration when studying Polish – Russian relations in the early Middle Ages. The research team included Warsaw and Lodz-based archeologists. In Konrad Jażdżewski's *Journals*, we read (Jażdżewski 1995: 266–267):

² In 1948 objects in the following localities were being studied: Biskupin, Gdańsk, Gniezno, Cracow – Wawel, Kruszwica, Łęczyca, Opole, Ostrów Lednicki, Poznań, Sobótka – St. Jacob's church, Szczecin. In 1949, 14 more localities followed: Bródno Stare, Cieszyn, Giecz, Inowłódz, Lutomiersk, Poznań – Przemysł's Mount, Rokitno – Błonie, Trzemeszno, Tyniec, Ślęża, Wały Śląskie, Warsaw – the Royal Castle, Wiślica, Wrocław. In 1950, excavation works began in Nowa Huta, Igołomia, Kalisz, Niemcza, and Strzelno. In 1952, there was a search for the Red Ruthenia (the studies were conducted in Gródek Nadbużny and Czermno on the river Huczwa).

Between the mid-August and the end of September of 1952, I became a sort of “forced” participant of the original archeological party, namely, I happened to take part in the study of the Red Ruthenia. (...) Not taking part in this event could, as I was told, be regarded as boycotting the collaboration. Another thing is that some time later it turned out that our Soviet colleagues on their side of the Polish – Soviet border had done virtually nothing, which was a clear expression of this collaboration. We had quite considerable funds intended for financing of the excavation works which were to be conducted in Gródek Nadbużny in Hrubieszów County and in Czeremno in Tomaszów County (Tomaszów Lubelski). The financial and commercial and part of scientific and research part of this venture were managed by the second, and actually formally speaking, first member of the management “duumvirate”, my former university colleague, Professor Zdzisław Rajewski, PhD, the director of the National Archeological Museum.

Despite initial success, once the first excavation season was over, the Lodz research team withdrew from further studies in southeastern Poland. These works, according to Andrzej Abramowicz (1926–2011) who was also their member, were considered by the archeologists to be the preparation for the revision of our eastern borders in favor of the Soviet Union, hence the reluctance to continue the undertaking and publish its outcomes (Abramowicz 199: 158–159).

In the beginning of the Direction’s operations, its primary research task was to capture the very beginnings of the Polish state; however, the program goals had quickly gained a new dimension. The concept of commemorating the 1000th anniversary of Poland was pushed aside in favor of scientific interests related to the entire process of the formation of feudal society on Polish territories (Gieysztor 1953: 44; 1950: 192). The development of research questions occurred hand in hand with the transformations happening in Polish science in the years 1949–1953 (Hübner 1992), for example, turning towards “material conditions of existence” inspired by Marxist theories gave rise to the studies on various areas of material early medieval culture in Poland. An important role in the evolution of the research questions was also played by the findings of the cyclical “millennium” scientific conferences – from yearly reporting and planning conferences to methodological and excavation-centered ones (off-site conferences). Altogether in the years 1948–1952, 52 such scientific meetings took place (in 1948 – 2, 1949 – 4, 1950 – 15, 1951 – 13, 1952 – 18). They were a unique forum for discussions, where archeologists and historians (representatives of other scientific disciplines to a lesser degree) would meet, which integrated the efforts of scientists representing various fields of science, to focus on the topic of Polish early Middle Ages. It was a revolution in the way of conducting historical research back then.

Growing experience obtained while working at the Direction of Studies on the Beginnings of the Polish State in the beginning of the 1950’s made the

scientists realize the need for the change in its structure. Certain significant shortcomings of the Direction were brought to light, for example, lack of stability in the employment of the scientific staff and the administrative nature of the central organization of the Direction. A significant expansion of the research program and a lack of permanent budget also played an important role in the entire matter. From the end of the 1950's there were efforts aimed at the creation of a new unit, a scientific institute focused on research (Gieysztor 1953: 5). These activities, not incidentally, coincided in time with a reconstruction of Polish science carried out by the communist authorities, aimed at the subordination of the entire Polish scientific life to the totalitarian party-state structure, centralization, and imposition of Soviet institutional and methodological models. In the face of organizational works that would lead to the establishment of the Polish Academy of Sciences, emerged a concern about the place of archeology in those new structures of sciences.

On 19 November 1953 in Warsaw, on the basis of the Direction of Studies on the Beginnings of the Polish State, the Institute of the History of Material Culture was established, first within the department of Culture and Art and then, the Polish Academy of Sciences (its foundation was the implementation of many-year aspirations of prehistorians to create a state archeological institute) (Lech 2009: 193–214). Additionally, four regional offices were established in Cracow, Poznań, Lodz, and Wrocław and regional workshops in Szczecin, Wolin, Kruszwica, Kalisz, Sandomierz, Gdańsk, and Igołomia. When the Direction was closed, the millennium project was continued by the Institute of the History of Material Culture. At the same time, this center had a more extensive research program that was not limited only to the early Middle Ages, although the “organization of the grand anniversary” still had an important place in its activities (the number of the “millennium” excavation sites increased to over 60).

Studies on the beginnings of the Polish state were the most significant venture in the history of Polish humanities in the post-war period. Paradoxically, they were favored by both war damages in the area of historic city districts and state authorities which, seeing the usefulness of archeological discoveries for political and social purposes, allocated large financial resources for research and supported it organizationally. Never before or after had archeology been this cherished in the party and government circles. After a large propaganda campaign accompanying anniversary ceremonies which were held in the atmosphere of the conflict state vs. church (Noszczak 2002), the interest of the authorities in the research of the early Middle Ages significantly decreased, especially that Polish – German relations had gradually normalized. The millennium program itself, despite its numerous weaknesses particularly in the area of methodology, is evaluated rather highly nowadays (Kurnatowska 1997a: 25–37; 1997b: 147–156; Urbańczyk 2001: 229–237; Kobyliński 2007:

357–409). Excavation studies gave us a significant number of archeological sources which constitute the fundament of our knowledge on the early medieval times on Polish territories (although it must be noted that the analysis of a large part of those archeological sources is still pending). Other permanent achievements of this campaign include the creation of the Institute of the History of Material Culture of the Polish Academy of Sciences (currently the Institute of Archeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences) and the initiation on new research directions, such as interdisciplinary studies in collaboration with historians and naturalists, inventory of particular categories of early medieval sites, or studies of cities and material culture. The conviction that archeology is a fully historical science (the term “prehistory” stopped being used) was also clarified at the time. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the millennium studies, conducted on an unusually large scale for its time, became an inspiration for numerous European archeologists and caused Polish archeologists to be invited to participate in the studies on early medieval sites in France, Italy, Spain, Yugoslavia, or Bulgaria.

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STRESZCZENIE

Z HISTORII POLSKIEJ ARCHEOLOGII. BADANIA
NAD POCZĄTKAMI PAŃSTWA POLSKIEGO 1948–1966
(PROGRAM „MILLENIUM”)

Krótko po zakończeniu drugiej wojny światowej archeolodzy i historycy podjęli szeroko zakrojone badania nad początkami państwa polskiego, popularnie zwane badaniami milenijnymi. Działania zaplanowane dla różnych dyscyplin miały na celu pozyskanie różnorodnych źródeł, które rzuciłyby światło na genezę i funkcjonowanie państwa pierwszych Piastów. Ze względu na potrzeby naukowe, społeczne i polityczne, badania milenijne korzystały ze wsparcia władz państwowych (finansowego i organizacyjnego).