

From the History of Polish Archaeology. In the Search for the Beginnings of Polish Nation and Country

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Abstract: The objective of this article is to discuss the role of archaeology in the search for Polish national roots. Questions regarding who we are, where the course of our history begins, have been important already during the Middle Ages. For several centuries, so-called ethnogenetic legends satisfied this curiosity. It was not until 18th century's 'intellectual upheaval' and subsequent partitions of Poland that a significant change in the mentality of Polish people occurred and a new theory of the origins of our nation was formed – the Slavic, what resulted in the development of archaeology, ethnography, history of Middle Ages and Slavic researches in general. After World War II, due to the need for commemorating the 1000-year existence of Poland, the years following 1945 witnessed a return to the search for the roots of Polish national identity. This time, the beginnings of our nation's history were marked by the year 966, the date of Mieszko I's baptism, the first historical Polish ruler.

Keywords: history of Polish archaeology, the search for Polish national roots, the Slavic past, the thousand years of the Polish state

The history of archaeology demonstrates that the discipline (together with other humanities) has been linked to social and political issues from the very beginning. However, the use of archaeology in an attempt to form national identity abounds in most numerous examples of its application. It has been used to 'prove' the right to the land, show nation's 'golden age', or explain the beginnings of a given community which actually determined its further fate simply because of the fact that without it, it would not have existed at all. The objective of this article is to discuss the role of archaeology in the search for Polish national roots.

Each nation needs to have an anchor in history. Questions regarding who we are, how long we have existed, or where the course of our history begins, have been significant already during the Middle Ages. For example, at the turn of 12th and 13th century, Wincenty Kadłubek (between 1155 and 1160–1223), a bishop from Cracow, in *Polish Chronicle* (that spanned from the ancient times until year 1202) written at Prince Kazimierz Sprawiedliwy's request, made the following move: he included our history in the ancient history. He considered Gallic Lechites, who were supposed to have fought victorious battles with Alexander the Great and Julius Cesar, to be our ancestors (Mistrz Wincenty 2003). By the way, one of Lechitic princes, Lestek III, supposedly married Cesar's sister who received Bavaria as a dowry and founded two cities in her own honor – Lubusz and Lublin (Kürbis 2003: LXXXIII–LXXXI). A Franciscan chronicler who lived at the turn of the 13th and 14th century, Dzierzwa (Mierzwa), attempted to trace the genealogy of Polish people from the descendants of Old Testament's Japheth, who, according to the Book of Genesis, was one of the three sons of Noah, the brother of Shem and Ham, the symbolic ancestor of the Indo-

Europeans (Miersuae Chronicon 1872: 164). Jan Długosz (1415–1480), nevertheless, a tutor to the sons of King Kazimierz Jagiellończyk, considered appropriate to commence the first book of his *Annales seu cronicae incliti Regni Poloniae* with a note on biblical 'prehistory' describing the origin of man, the creation and formation of human race represented by Adam (Długosz 1867: 1). Kadłubek, Dzierzwa, and Długosz were not isolated in such endeavors. It was a common practice of the authors of chronicles and historical papers from all over Europe to try to situate the history of their people in biblical history, most conventionally tracing them to one of Noah's sons, as well as ancient history, depicting their participation in important historical events of Greece and Rome. Sometimes, they made references only to biblical history, other times only to ancient history; however, very often they attempted to merge both threads creating respective genealogies or chains of events. These were so-called ethnogenetic legends, narratives about origins of a given community which had political character and functioned as propaganda as they played a role of tradition about pagan times thus avoiding accusations of barbaric past. In this way, the history of a given country would both gain a deeper time dimension and become comparable to the history of other nations (Pomian 1968: 14, 2002: 10).

Over the course of time, ethnogenetic legends began facing a lot of scrutiny. Removing them from historiography took several centuries since, while there was no justified answer as to where a nation came from, one ethnogenetic legend was replaced by another, more suited to the requirements of a given time period (Pomian 2002: 12). For example, in the 16th century, the powerful position of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth gave rise to the need for a reasonable justification of its new position among the European

nations. It regarded not only proving Poland's antiquity, no lesser than that of other European countries, but also its long-time autonomy and power rooted in the most ancient times. Medieval stories about Polish advantages over Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar were not enough to accomplish that. This new necessity was fulfilled by the theory of Sarmatian origin of Poland and Polish people developed by Polish historians of the Renaissance. This theory became the backbone of historical ideology of the Polish Lithuanian country in the 16th century (Grabski 2006: 243–250). The myth about Sarmatians being the ancestors of Polish people became so popular among the aristocracy that later on the original aristocratic culture of the 16th to 18th centuries was called Sarmatian. The Sarmatian concept was, among others, developed by a Polish historian living in the 16th century, Stanisław Sarnicki (1532–1597), who dated Polish history back to the times of Assarmot, the son of the biblical Shem, regarded as the ancestor of Slavs – Sarmatians. Then, in order to emphasize the nobility of Sarmatians' origins and augment their glory, Sarnicki gave extensive descriptions, obviously fictitious, of their most ancient historical events mixing motifs taken from both biblical and ancient tradition (Sarnicki 1582). Stories of this kind were most commonly used in state conflicts and to justify the current political system. For example, there were attempts to justify the advantage of aristocracy with the fact that it originated from the eldest or middle son of Noah, Shem or Japheth, both blessed by him, thus explaining that peasants originated from the youngest cursed Ham.

It was not until 18th century's 'intellectual upheaval' and subsequent partitions of Poland that a significant change in the mentality of the supposed descendants of Noah's sons occurred. The Sarmatian theory 'wore off', its myth-creating potential was erased by the ensuing national disasters (the Partition of Poland 1772–1795). At the same time, the fall of the country triggered the need for seeking the glory of the bygone eras. It was found, among others, in the ancient Slavic stories, when no traces of subsequent corruption and fall could yet be found. The reflection on this period became necessary at the time in order to build a common identity or create a link to the one once lost. In consequence, from the end of the 18th century to the 1860s, a new myth of the origins of our nation was formed – the Slavic myth. One can speak of a kind of Slavic fixation, which engulfed the Polish scholars and intellectuals in those times. However it resulted in the development of archaeology, ethnography, history of Middle Ages and Slavic researches in general. The papers discussing the interest in Slavic past very often point out the reasons for such a widespread acceptance of it among our society and the societies of other nations inhabiting Eastern, Central, and Southern Europe – we were not the only

ones who traced our origins to the Slavs (Francew 1906; Klarnerówna 1926; Witkowska 1969: 3–39; Kulecka 1997; Wierzbicki 1999; Fertacz 2000: 17–41; Kurczak 2000). It is emphasized that those interests stemmed from the ideas of Enlightenment, national movements, and the cult of national identity – understood as a collection of features that distinguish one nation from others (Wierzbicki 2010). There are frequent mentions of the emerging necessity of reaching back to the genesis of ethnic and national communities (as it was determined up to the ancient times) together with more and more clearly marked criticism of the civilization as a whole, triggered by the breakdown of feudalism. Turning to the past became a comfortable and favorite fiction for those who, witnessing or foreseeing significant historical changes, either searched for new models or objected to current conditions. Therefore, on the one hand, studies on the Slavs were a version of returning to the 'sources' (a problem many times undertaken by eighteenth-century Geneva philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau) in search of unspoiled human nature, not destroyed yet by civilization, because when a nation was losing its 'inherent nature' it was dying. Only a return to the sources could save it. Therefore, to know the origins of the nation's meant to discover the truest treasure trove of knowledge about it, to know its essence. On the other hand, it is important to take into account the pre-Romantic concept of a German thinker, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), who practically initiated 'Slavic renaissance' on the Balkans and in Eastern and Central Europe (Labuda 1968: 8–10, 2002: 59–67). In the famous Chapter 16 of his masterpiece *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, he not only showed Europe the spiritual identity of this group of people (gentle, peaceful, hardworking, hospitable, and joyful farmers persecuted for ages by other European peoples) but also its outstanding, growing and morally vague role in the future events; a mission so to speak (Herder 1962: 324–328). Herder's reasoning was basically rational. He believed that the world must start appreciating peace, work, pacific trade and agriculture, namely, all the values always respected by the Slavs and activities they gladly performed. Therefore, the era of Slavic people's greatness is certainly approaching and they will again be able to boast what once nobly distinguished them in the times of wartime turbulence of the early Middle Ages, which is, agricultural work, peaceful life, gentleness, and kindness. On the basis of Herder's theory Polish scientists of the Romantic period were creating beautiful myth of the good Slavs, establishing in this way a northern version of Arcadia. So much praised the Slavic gentleness was regarded by them as the result of agricultural activities, strong connection with soil and a sedentary lifestyle. Hence, farming in their opinion was not only one of the fundamental components of the reconstructed Slavic lifestyle, but also the basis of ideology, politics, religion,

and above all, the multiple concepts of social structure of the ancient Slavs. In the opinion of our researchers the Slavs formed their own community with a very simple structure (a family or lineage was the basic unit of society) and its characteristic feature was the lack of a leader – scientists advocated the idea of municipal authority (*gminowładztwo*) (Witkowska 1969: 32; Boroń 2000).

In Poland, turning towards ancient Slavic history was also brought about by local events, and not only triggered by the general increase of Slavophile sentiments in Europe. Those who investigate these issues emphasize that our loss of independence had a ground-breaking impact. At first, the historic catastrophe ‘numbed’ Polish people for how undeserved it seemed in the face of reformist achievements and plans of the era of King Stanisław August Poniatowski (reigned in 1764–1795). The idea of the fight for independence could only be conceived outside the country, among the emigrants, defenders of the nation who fled abroad. Those who remained, recovered from the defeat in the beginning of the following century and decided to sustain national spirit and find an adequate area of action. ‘After the fall of the Motherland’ – wrote the distinguished economist and historian, Wawrzyniec Surowiecki (1769–1827) – ‘looking at the grave dug for her, I felt immense sadness, especially when I thought that because of that terrible time, the glory of the power and name of a great nation in Europe may be forever extinguished, that in a few generations time Poland’s sworn enemies shall only remember Polish people with contempt. This painful thought took away my peace; I was tormented by it until a friendly glimmer showed me a weapon hidden in the nearby shadows – the remains of the glory of the ancient Poles’ (Surowiecki 1807: 199–200). This weapon was, of course, the study of the past.

Already in the 18th century, people in Poland understood that one of the conditions of a nation’s progress and rebirth was the knowledge of its history, which was reflected in the plans of delivering a book describing our past that would also include the origins of the country and nation, so called pre-Christian era. ‘There is no nation in the world’ – wrote Adam Naruszewicz (1733–1796) who undertook the preparation of the study at the request of King Stanisław August Poniatowski – ‘that would (...) not wish to know about its own beginning; there is no nation that could have the exact knowledge of it or at least one close to it’ (Naruszewicz 1836–1837: 6). He reached in his work (Naruszewicz 1780, 1781, 1783, 1785, 1786) the year 1386. However, he did not publish the outcomes of his researches on the ancient history of our nation. In this case Naruszewicz was convinced that he did not fulfill the rigors of scientific inquiry and got lost in the mists of fantasy and unproved hypotheses, which witnessed

the establishment of a historical truth (Serejski 1963: 42), but it is worth mentioning that in his views on the origins of our country, Naruszewicz adopted the widely spread theory of the conquest of Sarmatia by the Slavic invaders.

The fall of the country accelerated implementing the intentions of the systematic development of research on Polish history as the conviction of its great impact on preserving endangered culture and national ties was solidified (Dybiec 2004: 137–189). This is how the increased interest in Polish history among the educated part of the society in the beginning of the 19th century (*Odezwa* 1809: 251–265; reprint in: Kraushar 1902: 218–227 and Serejski 1963: 60–67) and later was justified. This is also how the spreading fondness for collecting historical artifacts, viewed as the legacy of our ancestors which must be preserved for the future generations, is validated (Dybiec 2004: 103–136; Szczerba 2012: 85–89). The research aimed at shedding light on the origins of our country as well as the basis on which it was formed was not discontinued. The studies of the most ancient pre-country and Slavic history of Poland were emerging and becoming one of the threads in this reflection. Ancient history scholars wished to remind everyone that Polish people are the age-old tribe that, in its original system, revealed great intellectual and moral values; values that in the historical development of Europe did not find their respective expression by that time. During the time of the Duchy of Warsaw, this conviction gave rise to the faith in Poland’s destiny to realize its historic role in the near future. The consequences of the failure to fulfill national political evolutions are generally similar everywhere. This is called Messianism (Ujejski 1931). At the same time, according to the experts in the field, turning to the distant past, to original Slavic roots was an attempt to create an ideology that would make it easier for Polish people to adapt to the changing political conditions. On one hand, they advocated the ideology postulating cultural and relative political unity of the Slavs; on the other hand, they concentrated on sustaining the national legacy (Wierzbicki 1999: 146; Kurczak 2000: 18). The second objective was more important for many and, as it turned out in time, more real.

It is then undeniable that the interest in Slavic roots emerged in us as one of the paths towards national rescue, principally at the center of the activities of the Warsaw Society of Friends of Sciences, functioning since 1800 (Abramowicz 1967: 9–44; Piotrowska 1968: 113–120; Chomentowska 1983: 95–102; Kulecka 1997: 26–30; Kurczak 2000: 9–10), but not limited to it (Lehr-Spławiński MCMXLVIII; Antoniewicz 1966: 24–93; Serejski and Abramowicz 1972: 26–59; Abramowicz 1991: 11–45). For obvious reasons, in the studies on Slavic issues, the point of gravity shifted from the

scarce and uncertain political history to the internal history of Slavic culture. Archaeological, ethnographic, and linguistic sources that were not taken much into account up to then were more often reached for. The ones that were preferred were those that corroborated the general vision of Slavic early history formed within the philosophical concepts of the late Enlightenment and early Romanticism (principally Herder's). By the way, before Slavophiles and Slavic studies experts appeared among the members of the above-mentioned institution, already in the second half of the 18th century, there existed scholars who took into account Slavic issues in their studies, to a greater or lesser degree, or even wrote first works on the subject, for example: Hugo Kołłątaj (1750–1812), Jan Potocki (1761–1815), Stanisław Trembecki (1739–1812), Stanisław Siestrzeńcewicz-Bohusz (1751–1826).

The studies on the Slavic past were conducted by the scholars of all the partitions echoing political changes taking place there. On Polish lands under the Russian rule, these issues did not encounter any objections from the tsarist authorities as they reflected similar interests within Russian science and politics (the idea of the unification of Slavic nations under the Romanoff rule, so-called Russian Pan-Slavism). The surge of interest in Slavic issues and history clearly increased here after the creation of the vassal Polish Kingdom and the monarchical union with the Russian Empire, which was almost regarded as the resurrection of Poland. However, the momentum of the studies that occurred before 1830 was slowed down due to political and cultural repressions after the November Uprising (Davies 1981: 60–82). Some scholars were forced to emigrate and those who remained in the country could not freely organize their scientific life. The post-uprising social mood lacked the adequate 'climate' that fostered the development of Slavic studies in the initial years of the Polish Kingdom when the political cooperation with Russia was going well. The difficulties in the Russian Partition were partly compensated for by less restricted conditions of political and cultural life in Galicia (i.e. Polish territory annexed by Austria as a result of the Partition of Poland). In the Prussian Partition, the Slavic movement was combined with the development of the concept of Slavic solidarity against the dominating tendencies of German historiography, whose one of the most prominent representative did not hold Poland and Slavs in high esteem (Labuda 1968: 22–25, 2002: 53). Hegel, the man in question, propagated a vision of Prussophile domination of 'Germanic spirit in Europe'. For him, Germanic countries and societies were the peak of intellectual development of so called historical nations. Slavic nations, being agricultural, historically enslaved, and passive in nature constituted a 'lower level' in the development of the 'universal human spirit' for Hegel. Hegel's politicized dialectics

that formed part of the national service of Prussia forced Polish intellectualists to develop own 'national dialectics'. The foundations of Polish national philosophy, reflected in the works of Messianic philosophers from the Grand Duchy of Posen (i.e. Polish territory annexed by Prussia as a result of the Partition of Poland) August Cieszkowski (1814–1894), Bronisław Trentowski (1808–1869), and Karol Libelt (1807–1875), were formed during that time and the strongest emphasis was placed on the uniqueness of our nation as well as its belonging to the large Slavic family. In this time, antiquarians felt the responsibility to demonstrate if not the superiority of Slavic culture than at least its equality to Germanic culture. Here, however, certain objective difficulties were encountered as while it may be easy to show Slavic people's moral superiority, hard evidence is required to demonstrate superiority in terms of civilizational development. Meanwhile, the development of civilizational trends moved towards the Slavs, not originated from them. In this situation, even dubious archaeological sources were reached for, such as historical artifacts with supposed Slavic runic writings that served as tangible evidence of rich Slavic pre-Christian culture (Boroń 2004: 35–43, 2005: 267–277). The discussion on the existence of Slavic runes was an important issue of the whole 19th century Polish archaeology, as the topic was deeply fascinating for the ancient history scholars. It was brought to light with the discovery of so called Prillwitz idols, a number of bronze figurines that supposedly represented Slavic deities with Slavic runic inscriptions and were said to have been discovered at the end of the 17th century in a village of Prillwitz in Mecklenburg (Boroń 2012: 19–38; Szczerba 2015: 7–44).

Significant changes in Slavic studies were brought about in the 1850s, 1860s, and particularly 1870s. First of all, there is a critical look at the previous discoveries (including the question of Slavic runes even though the belief in their existence still prevails). Polish archaeologists from the generation of uprisings and defeats searched for signs of rich Slavic culture in the monuments of ancient times; however, from the positivist point of view, criticism of this attitude was becoming stronger and it contrasted the image of Slavic people single-handedly creating its own culture with the idea of a poor Slavic world which developed only when influenced by Christian western culture. Second of all, since the 1870s the discussions on the Slavic past gained a very strong political subtext. In order to justify German rights to the land of the Prussian Partition, Prussian authorities advocated a theory about continuous German settlement on these lands since the ancient times (Kaczmarek 2004: 21–64). In the face of this situation, emerged the need to oppose German propaganda and archaeologists took active part in these actions. The attempts of establishing the Slavic

or German privilege over the land between the Vistula and the Oder became much more political in nature after World War I. During the interwar period, proving Slavic autochthony between the Vistula and the Oder in Poland belonged to the ideology of disproving historical justification of German expansion. The leader of this concept was Józef Kostrzewski (1885-1969; Kostrzewski 1970: 154-189; Gąssowski 1970: 138-162; Lech 2004: 21-64; Kurnatowska 2007: 37-47; Urbańczyk 2007: 23-36).

Due to the need for commemorating the Millennium of Poland, that is the 1000-year existence of our statehood (the originator of the idea was Witold Hensel [1917-2008], then 29-year old doctor of archaeology; Hensel 1946), the years following 1945 witnessed a return to the search for the roots of Polish national identity with the help of archaeological, historical, linguistic, and ethnographic studies (Hensel 1950: 27-45; Gieysztor 1953; Abramowicz 1991: 155-159; Kurnatowska 1997: 25-37, 1999: 159-172; Lech 1997-1998: 65-78). This time, the beginnings of our nation's history were marked by the year 966, the date of Mieszko I's baptism, the first historical Polish ruler. Why this date? Apart from the fact of Mieszko's baptism itself (as an act of political and religious significance), there were other factors at stake, but first of all, the reason for choosing this date stemmed out of the necessity to emphasize Polish links to western Christianity and to the western civilizations as well as stressing Poland's distance to Russia (USSR) – always Slavic. Besides, when illustrating Poland's path towards the west, year 966 also allows us to quite swiftly bypass Germany, what after the experiences of the World War II also had significance (Ślupecki 2007: 11-22). However, it must be also noted that like for archaeologist the interpretative key, which enabled them to integrate the oldest Polish history and modernity, was the indigenous theory, so for historians was the idea of Poland from the Piast period and the concept of native Polish lands, established in the interwar period by Zygmunt Wojciechowski (1900-1955). It's crucial objective was the recognition of the lands within the boundaries of the early Piast state as so-called the Polish 'nest territory' (Stobiecki 2007: 110). In connection with this, scientific research, which was scheduled for various historical disciplines, was aimed at getting as many information about the origin and functioning of the first Piast state as possible (war damages, which affected many Polish cities, including those of the Piast origin, naturally put forward archaeological excavations to the forefront of research tasks). In addition, for reasons less academic and more political and social, the Millennium program was also used to prove the Polish and Slavic character of the so-called 'Recovered Lands' (western and northern regions attached to Poland on the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences) and integrate them with the rest of the country. In some way it was an extension of the

defensive attitude directed against Germany, which was developed in the nineteenth century and during the interval period.

The program of 'preparation for the Great Anniversary', although this anniversary was differently understood by the catholic church authorities and differently by the state authorities (Noszczak 2002), and its scientific objectives were intertwined with the political one, was undoubtedly the biggest project in the history of Polish humanities in the postwar period. However it is still waiting for its monographer.

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