

(Review) Andrzej Buko, Świt państwa polskiego, Warszawa 2021: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Archeologii i Etnologii PAN, Muzeum Historii Polski, ISBN:978-83-66463-42-4. 332 pp. (in Polish with English summary)

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(Review) Andrzej Buko, *Świt państwa polskiego*, Warszawa 2021: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Archeologii i Etnologii PAN, Muzeum Historii Polski, ISBN: 978-83-66463-42-4. 332 pp. (in Polish with English summary)

This book attempts to explore the first stages of the rise of the Polish state specifically focussing on exploring the processes operating during the reign of its first historical ruler, duke Mieszko of the Piast dynasty (ruled c. 960-992). Unlike previous accounts that tend to treat this area (in fact, more or less that occupied by post-1945 Poland) as a single unit, the writer produces a more nuanced picture by looking at the disparate processes taking place in several discrete region within that larger unit between the end of the eighth century and the last decade of the tenth century. Much of the new work and insights discussed have come from archaeological projects with which the writer has himself been involved, many of which were in southern and eastern regions of the country, formerly somewhat neglected.

The monograph bases the narrative on the interpretation of the archaeological evidence as a key source of information on this subject; the written sources from the period are few, laconic and difficult to use. In the author's words, the book: "shows not only a colourful picture of the past a thousand years ago, but also the contribution of archaeology to understanding the roots of our state, and thus Poland and Poles". Both aims seem to have been met. Medievalists have often tended to use excavated remains as illustrations to a text-based history rather than as sources in their own right, but Polish archaeology broke away from this in the complex interdisciplinary research into Polish origins carried out under the 1949-1970 "Millennium Project". The study of the nation's early medieval past was given a new boost after 1990 with the rise of a new generation of scholars. This coincided with the use of new techniques for fieldwork (better understanding of excavation and field survey techniques, geophysics), and the analysis of the products (more sophisticated pottery analyses, increasing use of absolute dating – in particular the development of reliable

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dendro-dating, the use of isotopic and genetic analyses). This book is the result of considering the work of this “new wave” of scholarship.

The author has crammed a surprisingly large amount of information into the 329 pages of this compact (16.5 × 23.5 cm) volume that is explicitly addressed to both specialists and a wider circle of interested readers. The writing style is engaging and the material is skilfully organized (with a sizeable index of geographical, local and ethnic names that helps navigate it).

The narration has been organized into eight chapters each focussing on a group of selected issues from the region of modern Poland in the period concerned. There are two underlying themes, the first is the processes of centralization of power under the first Piast rulers that culminated in the creation in just a few years (probably between 962 and 966) of what we regard as the first Polish state. The second is the massive ideological shift that accompanied the process from native pagan beliefs to the acceptance (at least by the elite) of Christianity from more powerful neighbours process of culminating in the so-called “Baptism of Poland” in 966, which from today’s perspective has been seen as a watershed event in the creation of Polish culture and identity.

The first chapter (pp. 13-38) sets the background presenting a panorama of the transformations taking place in central and eastern Europe between the second half of the 8th century and the beginning of the 10th century. This period is marked in Poland by the crystallization of discrete territorial communities that can be detected through the distribution of settlements found by fieldwalking, often clustering around central places consisting of earth and timber strongholds, which in turn coalesce to form archaeologically legible larger regional groupings. The author uses the ethnographic literature to discuss (pp. 27-31) the nature of the social links these archaeological groupings may represent. This precedes four chapters presenting the changing archaeological characteristics and principle sites of various regions of Poland in the pre-state period (9th and first half of the 10th centuries).

The book’s second chapter (pp. 39-83) considers the broad zone in the southern part of Poland, along the rivers flowing from the mountains. Silesia in the SW (pp. 39-45) has a number of specific features, such as a distinctive construction of stronghold ramparts with stone facing and the presence of upland cult centres such as on Ślęza mountain. Despite the rather dense clustering of strongholds in the area, there seems to be a lack of evidence for the crystallisation in the pre-state period of larger-scale tribal unions. It is suggested that the area came under the cultural influence of the Moravian and then later the Přemyslid Czech state, reflected perhaps by the earlier appearance (9th century?) here of inhumation burials as well as the ‘southern’ pottery styles and finds of Moravian riders’ equipment.

The Kraków centre in the SE (pp. 68-76) likewise has a number of characteristic features not found in other regions. Above all are about a dozen massive areas, upwards of 10 ha, on hilltops and hill slopes in the Carpathian foothills enclosed by box-ramparts of wood and earth. There is a lack of evidence that these ‘Great Strongholds’, built from the mid 8th century and lasting in use until the 10th and 11th centuries, were involved in conflict

between each other (p. 83). In the region also are monumental earthen mounds (presumed funerary) not found elsewhere. The material culture also differentiates the region, apart from the rich metalwork assemblages (again including riders' equipment); from the end of the 8th century the pottery assemblages are dominated by vessels with a whitish or buff fabric (from the use of calcareous clays) of 'southern' style – this pottery abruptly disappears when the Krakow region is joined to the Polish state. It is unclear what the relationship was between this region and the Moravian state (in fact, Buko discusses whether or not there really was such a thing on pp. 77-79). The author explores the concept that the characteristics of the region reflect the chances of early statehood that in the end were unfulfilled.

In this chapter, too the author then discusses (pp. 45-68) his own work in the lesser-known regions on the northern edges of Kraków zone (Sandomierz, Lublin and Chełm) within which are traces of similar phenomena to those described above. It is demonstrated that each of them followed their own path in the period leading up to the establishment of Piast rule over them.

The third chapter (pp. 85-116) defines the characteristics and settlement changes in so-called Greater Poland, which is the core territory from which it seems the early state had its beginnings. This has a very dense network of well-investigated strongholds. One of the main topics is the appearance in the second half of the ninth century of a mysterious network of ringwork strongholds (pp. 91-96) of Tornov type which abruptly finish functioning in the period 920-40. Their appearance seems part of a wider phenomenon, their decline however seems related to the rise of Piast power. As an appendix to this the region of Mazovia with its much sparser settlement network is presented here (pp. 96-116) as a "great region in the shadow of Greater Poland". Settlement here is more discontinuous, strongholds are relatively speaking few and far between and knowledge of both is depicted as still rather sketchy.

The fourth chapter (pp. 117-139) discusses Pomerania, the broad zone in the furthest northwest of the country that forms the hinterland of the south coast of the Baltic Sea. Like Greater Poland, the area has a dense settlement network centred on the many strongholds. A particular focus is the emporia, such as Wolin, that functioned in the circum-Baltic economic zone and developed a proto-urban character from the eighth century. Regional differentiation is seen here too, in the west there is a specific funerary rite (Alt Kabelich) and zones of the interaction between local populations and settlers using Scandinavian style objects (pp. 127, 128). In the east, Scandinavian accents are also present, attention is drawn by the exceptional remains from the trading emporium of Truso at the Vistula estuary (pp. 131-135) and the presence of graves with Scandinavian material in the Elbląg area.

The picture that this overview of the various regions of the country in the pre-state period is one of a growing social complexity but also tensions, reflected by the functioning and construction of strongholds in the late 800s and early 900s, possibly as prestige sites as well as defensive measures against threats from neighbouring groups. The proliferation

and subsequent decline of large religious centres in some parts of ninth-century Poland may have represented early attempts at organizing into larger regional polities of some kind. The fate of both, however, suggests the inability to effectively maintain a status quo, the social, economic and organizational systems that represent proved vulnerable and unstable.

The fifth chapter, the longest in the book (pp. 141-188), presents the formation of the Polish state in the light of archaeological data. This is depicted as involving profound structural transformations (while previous chapters had illustrations depicting sites discussed in the text, this crucial part of the narrative is heavily accompanied by diagrams depicting processes). In the author's view, the emergence of the Polish state was due to a complex interplay of factors involving the needs of communities to organize defence, the contribution of population movements, shifts in settlement patterns, and foreign influences. The book somewhat brutally contrasts the archaeological evidence with the long-cherished dynastic legends reflected in later texts and traditions concerning the centres (Gniezno, Poznań, Kruszwica) in Greater Poland, and while these turn out to have had little explanatory merit, they prompt some thinking about the original ancestral seats and power base of the Piast family (Giecz? Kalisz?).

The origins of the medieval Polish state are attributed to a sort of 'revolution' originating in Great Poland, which witnessed significant transformations at the end of the tribal era. While this is not in itself a novel idea, the book shows how this process is particularly legible in shifts in fortified settlement locations that are now datable by more refined pottery studies, but above all the dendrochronological dates. Many old tribal strongholds did not escape destruction in this region and new sites were constructed by the Piasts. These new main centres of the state consisted of strongly fortified strongholds and their adjacent settlements (podgrodzia – singular: podgrodzie), representing the beginnings of early urbanization. This construction work involved a huge investment/consumption of resources (such as an unbelievably large amount of lumber which must have led to large scale deforestation and other environmental changes in the natural landscape already before the end of 10th century). The author argues for the process being accompanied by profound demographical changes, examples of which are migrations and the deliberate relocation of the populace that seem to be archeologically detectable in many regions.

The second part of this chapter discusses the beginnings of the territorial expansion of from this core area (pp. 157-188). At Sandomierz there is good evidence (p. 160) for population replacement (including the abrupt intrusion of a foreign pottery style brought from the areas to the west). This may be interpreted as migration/resettlement of populations from centres that were crushed in the expansion of Piast rule – possibly coming there as prisoners that had been driven out. The author then discusses the evidence for Piast expansion into Mazovia in the 970s, again apparently involving population replacement and the destruction of old and construction of new central places (pp. 160-167).

Another direction of expansion was to the Baltic coast. This seems to have begun in the 970s with military action in eastern Pomerania. In this context, the book describes the

ongoing debates about the location of the first port of Gdansk, or whether there was one there at all until a bit later (pp. 135-139 and 167-169). The extension of Piast power to western Pomerania in the 980s seems not to have disrupted the functioning of the emporia such as at Wolin, Szczecin and Kolobrzeg, indeed they flourished in this period and provided the Piasts with economic benefits. Inland from the Pomeranian coast, however, there were far-reaching social/cultural changes that included a clear development of the settlement network with the settling of previously empty areas. Not many of the old pre-state strongholds survived, and a number of new ones were founded to replace them (p. 174).

It seems that some time in the tenth century the Czech Přemyslids had laid claim to the territory in the regions to the south in the forelands of the mountains (p. 43), but while a tributary relationship may have existed, there were few physical traces of this in for example the creation of any strongholds. There may be traces of an earlier Czech phase under the main centre of the region, Wrocław. The latter site was remodelled on the establishment of Piast control in Silesia (dated to the 980s). It seems that Kraków Land which the Piast state absorbed (c. 989) may also have previously had some kind of relationship with the Czech state. A contrast here with the evidence elsewhere was that after the extension of the Piasts into the area (the process still being somewhat unclear) was that the Great Strongholds of the region not only were not destroyed, but continued to function into the eleventh century. There is even the example of Wiślica (pp. 177-180), where it seems the Piast stronghold with ecclesiastical buildings was built less than half a kilometre from the existing site that continued in use.

The final section of this long chapter starts off as a brief but masterly discussion of where Mieszko got the funds necessary to build the state, and discusses the various factors involved, plunder from warfare, tribute/gifting, controlling trade routes in various directions, as well as the slave trade (hitherto a somewhat neglected theme in Polish historiography). Tucked away inconspicuously at the end (pp. 186-188) is a key passage referring to the definition of a state and a brief mention (with an exciting map) of the mysterious and ultra-laconic copy of an (apparently) tenth century document known as “Dagome Iudex” without which it seems Polish authors unanimously agree that no discussion of early medieval Poland can be without.

Chapter six (pp. 189-211) has as its subject the beginnings of Christianity in Poland but in fact incorporates a fascinating and instructive discussion of the interpretation and misinterpretation of archaeological features on Polish sites linked with this process. The remains of the architecture related to that baptism were eagerly sought by archaeologists under today’s baroque churches and this chapter introduces some of what was found, including the remarkable complex of churches on the Wawel rock rising up over the town of Kraków (pp. 190-193). Also discussed are the mysterious complex of structures on Ostrów Lednicki island (pp. 198-203). The author raises the question whether instead of the “Baptism of Poland” of the history textbooks, the physical remains instead suggest the demonstrative baptism of a small part of the state’s elite.

The final part of the chapter (pp. 203-209) discusses the issues of the first graves of the new burial rite, the foundation of new cemeteries, not only by churches but also in the countryside of cemeteries with their E-W supine inhumations in rows. Although some are tenth century, it seems most date from the eleventh century, but even then there were accompanying grave goods (pp. 208, 209). Tellingly, the final section of this chapter is called "more questions than answers".

Chapter seven (pp. 213-252) leads on from the preceding discussion of cemeteries and here in it Buko heeds the maxim that archaeology is about people. The pages of the history books are populated by the elite, those who were mentioned in the written sources (and about whose lives we sometimes know quite a lot and whose motives we can infer). Society was actually made up of countless thousands of people whose lives can only be discussed on the basis of the physical traces they left behind, the objects and structures they used, the changes effected on the sites where they lived their lives, as well as their corporeal remains.

The several different types of cemeteries are discussed (pp. 219-224) and what they reveal about the social structure of the deceased. Discussion then shifts to the issue of evidence from human remains, material culture and isotope evidence (pp. 238-240), for regional and interregional migrations and other means to determine kin and interpopulation relationships within cemetery populations (pp. 240-243). There is also a substantive presentation of the health of communities as revealed by anthropological evidence, about the diet of the inhabitants of Polish lands a thousand years ago, what they were sick with and how long they lived (pp. 246-252).

The eighth part of the book's text summarises and helpfully brings together the various threads of the regional sections into a single chronological narrative (pp. 253-256), characterising the processes operating in the whole region decade by decade. At the end of the book is an extensive (pp. 291-303) and useful English summary that is almost something of a standalone essay that expands the book's final text and refers to the figures (which have English captions) that will enable its reader to follow the author's arguments in some detail. Between the two is a substantial 32 page bibliography (pp. 257-289).

Though a relatively compact book, the reader is presented with a substantial portion of attractively packaged material and introduced to a lot of the current cutting-edge thinking on the topic. The material presented shows not only how our understanding of the formation and expansion of the early medieval Polish state has been significantly refined, but also how it is revealed as a much more complex multifaceted narrative than the traditional portrayals. The skilful use of the results of the use of new methods and recent archaeological investigations is a valuable contribution to the literature on the subject, not only of interest for Polish researchers but also those of adjacent regions, and from this point of view, the way the basic ideas have been made accessible to foreign readers is exemplary.

Of particular interest is the way that, although it deals with the west-facing aspects of the early state (in particular its relationship with the Ottonians), unlike the majority of its

predecessors, this is not the main focus. The book draws also attention to the significance of the eastern territories (Lublin, Chelm, eastern Mazovia) as borderlands with Rus', topics that have tended to be relatively neglected in previous syntheses.

While the book focuses on the information from archaeology, the written sources and traditions are not ignored. This narrative asserts the need for dialogue between documentary and other sources and identifies a number of conceptual and methodological problem areas. The book adroitly deals with topics where there has in the past been over-interpretation of unclear information and, where opposing interpretations of the same sources have arisen, presenting both sides, indicating where there is a conflict but often resisting the temptation for the author to impose his own preferred explanation, preferring to leave the issue for later resolution. In this sense the book serves more as a stepping stone for future research than a presentation of research as a *fait accompli*.

The reviewer has a few quibbles. It would have been very helpful to have had a map of the country showing the location of the main places (and boundaries of the regions) discussed in the work rather than assuming all readers will be aware of where they lie in relation to each other. The illustrations are well-chosen and integrate well with the text, but some with multiple images overlain on each other have the appearance of powerpoint presentations for a lecture that would look good on a screen or wall, but lose a lot of their legibility on a page this size. Since the book's 93 illustrations come from a variety of sources, there is some variation in their style, which is acceptable, but this leads to problems when they are incompatible with each other in terms of the information they present (the position of strongholds in figs 9, 19, 31 *etc.*), or in situations where a map (fig. 8) shows an ethnonym in an area, while the text (pp. 79-83) questions whether these 'Polanie' inhabited the region in question in pre-state times. It is also puzzling why the book does not make any substantial use of the results of the massive landmark project of monographic publications (in the ongoing series *Origines Polonorum*, 2013-present) of the backlog of final results from the major excavation projects conducted in the 1949-1970 "Millennium Project".

As noted above, the formal definition of a state is provided in a brief passage in the text. One is struck by the degree to which the process of state-building is shown as relying on violence and repression to create a centralized political authority that would exercise firm control over a defined territory. A prevalent theme is the widespread destruction, often by fire, and abandonment of tribal centres across regions like Great Poland, Little Poland, and Mazovia. This was then followed by the establishment of new central settlements under Piast control. By changing the locations of these strongholds, a deliberate shift away from earlier tribal centres emphasises the imposition of a new way of organizing the landscape on the ashes of the preceding one. One might ask whether the author considers that there was an ideological basis for this, an economic one, or (given the emphasis on the effects on the environment of these centres) perhaps simply the practical aspects of moving the construction sites closer to where there were still stands of trees?

The motif of coercion reappears in the evidence for the (apparently abrupt) changes in population densities, as populations surged in some areas while dwindling in others. The author presents evidence for large-scale population relocations during state formation. As yet, the mechanisms are not firmly determined, but there is a disturbing possibility that these were the result of coercive acts akin to ethnic cleansing and or repression, driving populations out, enslaving or annihilating them. Such migrations would have resulted in various forms of interactions and intermingling of different cultural and social groups that would contribute to the emergence of new hybridized socio-cultural, if not ethnic (and linguistic?), identities. Foreign influences played a crucial role in the success of the state's expansion and integration, with the recruiting of warriors, including those equipped with equipment of 'Scandinavian' aspect. The retinue of the ruler of the state seems to have contained foreigners who may have acted as some kind of 'siloviki' imposing the will of their leaders and maintaining the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force within their territory. The author does not explore the topic of to what degree Mieszko's Poland was purely a tribute-gathering militocracy organized around warlords or something more akin to a mafia-state. There is very little evidence from the archaeology (or indeed written sources from the late 10th century) on any kind of more sophisticated bureaucratic structure to administer governance and maintain administrative records or a anything like a state-imposed developed legal system codifying governance. These things certainly existed in the later phases of the Early Medieval Polish state and were important to its cohesion and functioning, and a detailed discussion of any evidence on when and how they started would have been welcome, though may have been beyond the scope of this book.

There is also a certain amount of ambiguity about the religious aspects of the processes operating at the dawn of the Polish state. In general, religious beliefs, practices and institutions often play a significant role in ethnogenesis, be a key element of identity and a source of cultural and social cohesion and development. Adopting the same Christianity that was practiced by the state's immediate neighbours (Moravia, Czechs, Ottonians etc.) may also have been seen as having a political and protective function. It is not known to what degree coercion was used to convert Mieszko's subjects to Christianity (if at all, it really does seem to have been an elite phenomenon). Traces of destruction of the pre-tribal cult centres often cannot be accurately dated and could have been done in later periods.

Most previous accounts of the beginning of the Polish state have tended to treat as a whole block a period that ends perhaps in the eleventh, or even twelfth centuries. This makes the task easier because it increases the amount of evidence from written sources, on the elite and ecclesiastical affairs, a charter or two and the beginnings of the Medieval chronicles. The author however has deliberately chosen to focus on the narrow period equivalent to the time of the operation of Mieszko. This then removes the temptation to speculatively/hopefully extrapolate backwards information that applies to a later period to fill in gaps, and isolates what we know from that which is merely assumed. This makes this an important and much-needed book that sets the stage for more detailed discussions and hypothesis-testing.