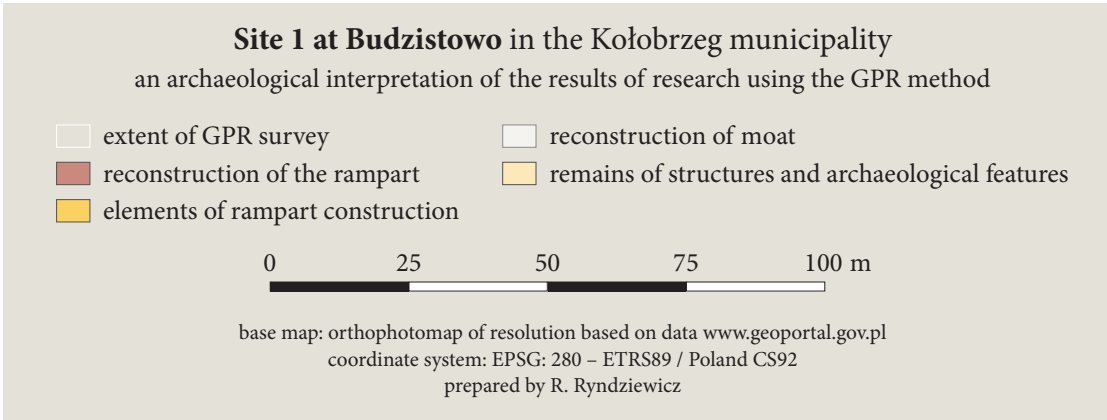


# BOLESŁAW ON THE BALTIC



Fig. 1  
Ground-Penetrating Radar  
(GPR) surveys carried out by  
a team from the Institute  
of Archaeology  
and Ethnology,  
Polish Academy of Sciences  
in 2022 enabled precise  
identification of the outline  
of the rampart at  
the Kołobrzeg stronghold





In the year 1000, Emperor Otto III's visit to St. Adalbert's tomb in Gniezno led to the establishment of a Polish metropolitan see. One of the newly created bishoprics was based in Kołobrzeg on the Baltic coast, which thenceforth served as the principal stronghold of the Polish state's Baltic province.

### Marian Rębkowski

Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology,  
Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw

In the year 1000, Holy Roman Emperor Otto III arrived on a pilgrimage to the tomb of St. Adalbert in Gniezno, where he was lavishly received by Bolesław the Brave. One of the most important outcomes of this meeting – remembered as the “Congress of Gniezno” – was the establishment of a Polish metropolitan see and the creation of three new subordinate dioceses, with seats in Kraków, Wrocław, and Kołobrzeg. At the time, these were the main strongholds in lands that had only recently come under Piast control, in the final decades of the tenth century. The church structure was meant not only to serve as a foundation for the Christianization of conquered communities, but also to become an important element of the Piast state infrastructure in these new provinces. The reasons and circumstances behind the decision to establish a bishopric in the Baltic town of Kołobrzeg are particularly intriguing.

### The Kołobrzeg Stronghold

Archaeological research shows that the Kołobrzeg stronghold had been built more than a century earlier, around the year 880, on the right bank of the Parsęta River, less than 4 km south of its mouth. Its construction followed a period of local conflict, destruction, and the collapse of several older defensive sites, resulting in the emergence of a new center of power for the Slavic tribe that inhabited the middle and lower reaches of the river. Unfortunately, we do not – and likely never will – know the name of this tribe, one of several living between the lower Oder in the west and the lower Vistula in the east. Along the Vistula stretched a border zone separating Slavic settlement from Prussian tribes. The wood-and-earth rampart of the Kołobrzeg stronghold enclosed an area of no more than 1 hectare (fig. 1). By the early tenth century at the latest, the settlement had developed proto-urban characteristics, becoming not only a center of tribal

authority but also a site of craft production and trade (fig. 2). Its coastal location allowed it to engage in long-distance Baltic trade, spurred by Scandinavian networks. Another important factor was the presence of saltwater springs between the stronghold and the sea, long used for producing salt – a commodity in demand across many markets. These saltworks were such a distinctive part of the local landscape that the chronicler describing the Congress of Gniezno recorded the town's name in Latin as *Salsa Cholbergensis* (which might be rendered in English as the Kołobrzeg Saltworks).

It is not possible to determine the exact date when Kołobrzeg was taken by the Piast rulers, but it is highly likely to have happened during the reign of Mieszko I. However, it was only in the early years of his son Bolesław the Brave's rule, in the final decade of the



**Prof. Marian Rębkowski**

is Director of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences. A specialist in medieval archaeology, his research focuses on urbanization, Christianization, intercultural relations, and the formation of power structures in the Middle Ages, as studied through the lens of archaeological sources.

[m.rebkowski@iaepan.edu.pl](mailto:m.rebkowski@iaepan.edu.pl)



Fig. 2: Products made of horn and amber, along with production waste from a craft workshop operating in the Kołobrzeg stronghold in the first half of the tenth century



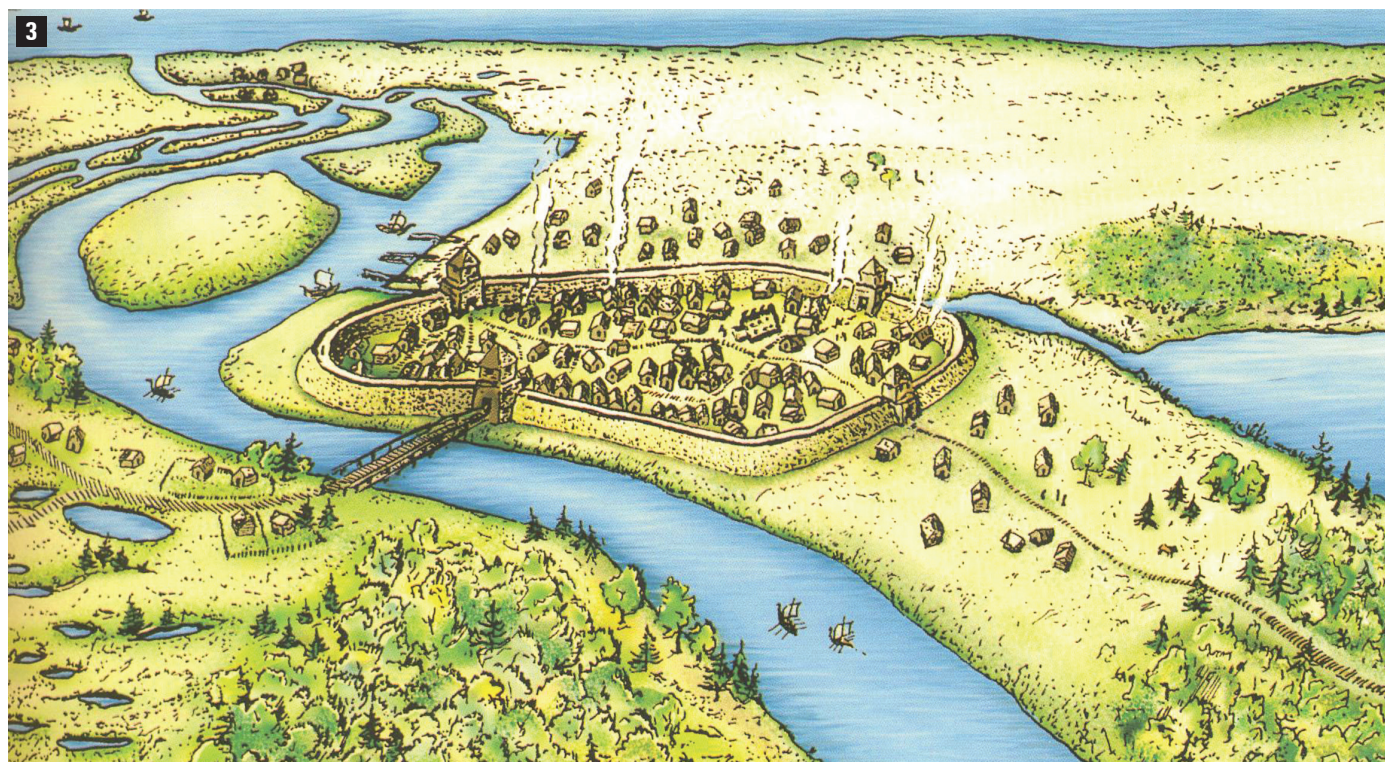


Fig. 3  
Kołobrzeg around  
the year 1000  
(based on a reconstruction  
by Lech Leciejewicz)

10th century, that the ramparts of the Kołobrzeg stronghold were rebuilt and reinforced using construction techniques characteristic of Piast builders. This is confirmed by dendrochronological analysis and a coin found among the remains of the fortifications. It can be assumed that building the new ramparts was an important step in preparing Kołobrzeg to serve as the administrative center of the state's Baltic province and as the seat of a bishop (fig. 3). In the year 1000, Reinbern, a clergyman from the Saxon-Slavic borderland, became that bishop.

## Pressing northward

What factors lay behind the expansion of the Gniezno-based state toward the Baltic Sea, which ultimately led to the establishment of a bishop's seat in a stronghold nearly 300 kilometers north of its center? The Piast dominion, which emerged during the first half of the tenth century within the relatively small territory of the Gniezno Lake District, quickly acquired the characteristics of an early state. As in many other known cases of similar emerging monarchical structures, the success of such a venture in its early phase depended on its ability to expand, conquer neighboring areas, and acquire spoils or tribute. In the early Middle Ages, silver was a particularly coveted good in the consolidation of power – not only because of its intrinsic value, but also due to the “prestige economy” it generated. The elites of the emerging Piast state

could secure a regular supply of silver only through participation in long-distance trade or control over trade routes. In the tenth century, the Baltic region was especially attractive in this regard and relatively close to the original Piast domain. For about two centuries, it had been part of an economic zone created and dominated by the Scandinavians, who engaged in far-reaching trade. This resulted in the emergence of coastal centers of exchange and craft production of various kinds, such as Wolin, Kołobrzeg, and Truso. As a result, large quantities of silver flowed into the southern Baltic coast, primarily in the form of Arabic coins (dirhams) and ornaments. It is thus no surprise that the Baltic lands quickly attracted the attention of the Piast rulers.

It is no coincidence that some of the earliest historical sources about Mieszko I concern his military involvement in the 960s along the lower Oder. These refer to several armed encounters between the Gniezno ruler and the Saxon exile Wichman, who led the people of Wolin. These events were likely part of a broader conflict over control of the Oder estuary, where Wolin – then a flourishing Baltic emporium – was entering its golden age. Its importance to the Piast elites is demonstrated by the fact that the Arabic silver they began absorbing in increasing quantities during the 950s and 960s in fact reached Gniezno via the lower Oder and Wolin (Fig. 4).

We have no definitive evidence to conclude that Mieszko had already subjugated the Wolin emporium



at that time. Still, by the end of his life, he undoubtedly controlled at least part of the Baltic coast. According to the document known as *Dagome iudex*, in which the ruler entrusted his domain to papal protection shortly before his death, his authority reached the sea by the year 992. However, judging from other kinds of evidence, by the final decade of the 10th century the Piasts' Baltic interests – especially those of Bolesław the Brave – were increasingly focused along the lower Vistula. At that time, the emporium of Truso, located on the right (Prussian) bank of the river, was experiencing a period of prosperity; its remains were discovered years ago in the village of Janów Pomorski, near the town of Elbląg. Still unidentified archaeologically is the settlement center that most likely functioned on the “Slavic” side of the Vistula, in the area of present-day Gdańsk. That is almost certainly where we should locate *urbs gyddanyzc*, visited in 997 by St. Adalbert on his way to Prussia, where he carried out a mission on behalf of the Polish ruler. The very name of the settlement, recorded in one of the martyr's hagiographies, may be indicative of the economic significance of the site at that time.

## Dominance on the Baltic?

Bolesław the Brave's political activity along the lower Vistula is well illustrated by the cemeteries discovered in that region, where members of the Piast state elite are buried. Especially striking are male graves containing weapons and riding equipment – sometimes in large chamber graves. We can identify some of these men with a high degree of certainty as members of the ducal military retinue. A chain of such burial grounds, dated to the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, stretches along the Vistula from the frontier of the Gniezno realm (Bodzia near Włocławek, Pień, Kąldus) to Ciepłe, just 50-odd kilometers south of the river's mouth on the Baltic.

The archaeological data outlined above – even in this briefest form – show that, by the early 990s at the latest (and probably earlier), the Piast rulers had brought part of the Baltic coast under their control, turning it into a territorial dependency of their realm – what medieval documents called a *pertinency*. It was likely at this time that the name Pomerania (“the lands by the sea”) acquired its political-administrative sense. Archaeological evidence of widespread destruction of tribal strongholds during the second half of the tenth century testifies to conquest and the imposition of a new spatial order. The scale is striking: cautious estimates suggest that almost two-thirds of previously functioning fortresses were abandoned – usually after being destroyed. These ruins probably mark the extent of Piast control on the Baltic, that is, the borders of their Pomeranian *pertinency*, observable between the



lower Vistula in the east and the Rega catchment in the west. If so, the common historiographical notion that Mieszko I and Bolesław the Brave ruled as far as the Oder estuary on the north-west deserves serious doubt.

A key step in integrating this coastal region was the creation of the bishopric at Kołobrzeg, confirming the stronghold as the main Piast center on the Baltic. Holding part of the shoreline offered not only economic benefits but also a foothold in Baltic politics. In the 980s, Mieszko I's daughter Sygryda/Świętosława was married to the Swedish king Eric, and during Bolesław's reign she wed King Sweyn Forkbeard of Denmark. The influence and prominence of Bolesław in Baltic affairs echo in the figure of the Slavic king Burysław, who appears in Scandinavian sagas describing events around the turn of the 11th century (though the sagas were written two centuries later).

Bolesław's plan to incorporate Pomerania permanently into his realm ultimately failed. The causes were complex; one was surely the changed political climate after the outset of his long war (1004–1005) with Henry II of Germany. Sometime before 1013 Bishop Reinbern left his Kołobrzeg see – a clear sign that Piast authority on the coast had collapsed. It would not be until just over a century later that Bolesław the Wrymouth would conquer the whole stretch between the lower Oder and lower Vistula; its eastern part then remained much more lastingly tied to the Polish state. ■

Fig. 4  
Fragment of a silver coin  
hoard hidden in Wolin  
after the year 982  
(from the collection of  
the Museum in Wolin)