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THE WEAPONRY OF A THOUSAND YEARS AGO

The armed forces of Poland's first crowned king reflected his power and prestige. Through their diversity, weaponry, and loyalty, Bolesław's warriors helped him pursue his ambitious plans for expansion.

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The reign of Bolesław the Brave marked a period of dynamic growth for the Piast state and helped secure Poland's place on the international stage. A central pillar of his rule was an assertive foreign policy in which warfare played an essential role in building and demonstrating Piast power. Bolesław worked to secure the country's borders, took advantage of opportunities for territorial expansion, and skillfully combined military campaigns with diplomacy. His approach relied not only on armed conflict but also on forging both lasting and temporary alliances, allowing him to compete effectively with powerful neighbors. He was adept at recognizing favorable circumstances and using them to expand his realm at minimal cost.

During Bolesław's reign, the Polish lands experienced major social and cultural transformations, including significant developments in the military sphere. It was during this time that the military structure of the early state began to take shape – an essential factor in the success of Poland's first crowned king. To understand the nature of warfare around the turn of the millennium, we must examine how military forces were organized, the tactics they employed, and the types of weapons used by contemporary warriors. Equally important is a grasp of the broader political

and strategic context in which these military campaigns took place.

Among Bolesław's most important campaigns were his wars against the Germans, fought between 1002 and 1018, including raids into the March of Meissen, the Milceni lands (*Milsko*), and Lusatia. The long conflict with Holy Roman Emperor Henry II ended with the Peace of Bautzen in 1018, which sealed Poland's control over some of the contested territories. Another major event was the expedition to Rus' in 1018, during which Bolesław captured Kyiv and installed his son-in-law Sviatopolk on the throne. The Polish ruler also fought against the Czechs, at one point occupying Prague and Moravia. He waged war against the Polabian Slavs and possibly against Baltic peoples as well. In carrying out these plans, Bolesław drew on support from various allies – Moravians, Czechs, Hungarians, the nomadic Pechenegs, and even German knights who had recently been his enemies.

The military forces in Bolesław's realm consisted primarily of the *drużyna* (the prince's elite retinue), and the general levy (mobilized in the event of foreign invasion).

The elite retinue

The origins of the *drużyna* likely go back to the period before the formation of the historical Piast realm, when the most experienced warriors served as a personal guard to the leader or chief of a local or tribal community. At first, this was probably a small unit of warriors who remained in the immediate presence of the leader and were entirely dependent on him. As



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the ruler's domain expanded and state structures consolidated, his elite retinue evolved into a professional military force, becoming the prince's main instrument of coercion. It enabled him to enforce authority over his territory, maintain order, and expand the influence of the Piast dynasty. The *drużyna*'s power made it possible to suppress revolts and popular resistance – an essential part of the state-building process. A key aspect of its function was its role in maintaining the continuity of power. With a loyal and well-trained army, the ruler could impose his will on subjects and ensure hereditary succession by eliminating potential rivals.

Beyond political and material ties, members of the *drużyna* shared a direct relationship with the prince, rooted in loyalty and camaraderie forged through joint military campaigns. The *drużyna* functioned as both a military force and a social elite, whose members benefited from proximity to the ruler – it offered them the chance to participate in conquests,

acquire spoils, and rise in the social hierarchy. The warriors were fully supported by the prince, who provided them with weapons, horses, food, shelter, and cared for their families. In return, he demanded absolute obedience and constant combat readiness. This model of co-existence allowed for rapid response to threats, effective offensive operations, and territorial expansion. Conquest itself provided the resources needed to reward the warriors, thus ensuring their loyalty. This system of mutual obligations and benefits made the *drużyna* a highly effective tool of rule and a dynamic structure capable of adapting to changing political conditions. Military effectiveness was especially important during power transitions – only decisive action and the elimination of opponents could secure the throne for a new ruler. A prime example is Bolesław the Brave himself, who, aware of the threat posed by nobles loyal to his stepmother Oda and her sons, took harsh measures to consolidate power. He had the opposition leaders Przybywoj

Part of the exhibitions
at the Museum of the
First Piasts at Lednica

Fig. 1
Conical helmet
from Lake Lednica



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Fig. 2
Early medieval swords
from Lake Lednica



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and Odilen – possibly former members of his father Mieszko I's retinue – blinded, and expelled Oda and her sons from the country, removing a potential source of rebellion.

The *družyna* was internally differentiated: it was divided into armored warriors (Latin *loricati*, "mail-clad") and shield-bearers (Latin *clipeati*). The former took their name from their heavy armor, including iron helmets and chain mail. They were most likely also mounted units, though some may have served

in mixed formations. These soldiers formed the core of the army and were tasked with breaking enemy lines and launching decisive assaults. Their heavy gear made them formidable in close combat and resistant to enemy strikes.

This elite force was complemented by the shield-bearers. These were likely lightly armed troops whose primary defensive gear was the shield. They probably fought as infantry, occasionally supported by small units of light cavalry. Shield-bearers were recruited from among the free population – possibly one out of every ten heads of households, or even one out of every five or six. On the battlefield, their main role was to fight in tight formations and to support and protect the armored soldiers. They were effective in sieges of enemy strongholds and may also have been used for constructing or repairing fortifications in conquered territories – as possibly evidenced by the fortified site at Přerov in Moravia, likely erected during Bolesław the Brave's occupation of the region after 1003.

The mass levy

Alongside the ducal retinue, there also functioned the *levée en masse* – called up on an *ad hoc* basis in response to an external threat. Its organization was rooted in local settlement structures, and participation was mandatory for all able-bodied men. This type of military system was a remnant of the earlier period of tribal democracy and reflected a long-standing tradition of collective defense by the entire community. Unlike the permanent, professional ducal retinue, the mass levy lacked regular structure and unified training, making it less effective in offensive campaigns. Nonetheless, it played a vital role in defending the country during invasions. Particularly valuable was the participants' knowledge of local terrain, which enabled ambushes, the use of natural obstacles, and guerrilla tactics to offset the enemy's superior equipment. These hastily recruited warriors were responsible for equipping themselves, which reduced their overall combat effectiveness. Despite these limitations, the mass levy remained an important tool for mobilizing the ruler's forces and was used for many centuries.

The supreme commander of all armed forces was the ruler himself, who often participated in battles, inspiring his troops and reinforcing his authority. The prince was assisted in command by seasoned military leaders, usually drawn from his family or closest circle. For instance, Mieszko II Lambert, son of Bolesław the Brave, frequently led his father's armies in conflicts with Germany and Bohemia. Similarly, Mieszko I's brothers also held commanding roles – Czcibor helped defeat the forces of Margrave Hodo and Count Siegfried of Walbeck at the Battle of Cedynia in 972,

while another brother, whose name is unknown, died fighting the Veleti and the exiled Saxon count Wichmann the Younger.

Bolesław's military forces were well-organized, operating under a combination of decimal and ternary systems, which facilitated battlefield command and unit management. According to Gallus Anonymus, Bolesław's retinue numbered 3,900 mail-wearers and 13,000 shield-bearers, totaling 16,900 troops. These warriors were said to come from the major strongholds of the early state – Gniezno, Poznań, Giecz, and the stronghold of Włodzisław (possibly Włocławek?). These centers likely served as mobilization hubs rather than permanent garrisons.

While Gallus' numbers are often questioned, dividing them by 13 results in units of 300 mail-wearers and 1,000 shield-bearers, which suggests a plausible organizational model. Other sources confirm similar structures—for example, in the year 1000, Bolesław gifted Otto III a unit of 300 knights, and Emperor Henry II sent an identically sized contingent to support the 1018 Kievan campaign. Notably, the traveler Ibrahim ibn Yaqub, who described Mieszko I's realm in 965, reported that the prince had 3,000 knights, noting that “a hundred of them are worth a thousand other warriors,” possibly indicating the use of a comparable system even earlier.

Warriors' gear

The weaponry used by warriors in Bolesław's time was varied and adapted to different forms of combat, both on foot and on horseback. Valuable information about weapons and equipment from that period comes from archaeological finds. Particularly important are the discoveries from Lake Lednica, where a battle likely took place shortly after Bolesław's death between the defenders of the stronghold on Ostrów Lednicki and Czech forces invading Polish lands under Duke Bretislav. Hundreds of military artifacts recovered from the site provide direct insight into the armament used in the early eleventh century and indirectly allow for the reconstruction of fighting techniques. Weapons recovered from the lake include numerous swords, axes, spearheads, arrowheads, and elements of defensive gear. Especially valuable are complete iron helmets (Fig. 1), chain mail armor, and richly decorated swords, spearheads, and axes, some inlaid with silver and gold. These finds confirm the high quality of the armament and the richness and diversity of the early Piast military heritage. Weapons originated both from local production and from imports, including from the German Empire, Scandinavia, Kievan Rus', and possibly also nomadic peoples from the Pontic Steppe. This indicates that Polish lands were already a cultural melting pot, drawing on both Western European and Eastern traditions.



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Fig. 3
Spearheads from
Lake Lednica



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Fig. 4
Early medieval axes
from Lake Lednica

Among bladed weapons, swords stand out as symbols of status and membership in the military elite (Fig. 2). They were often imported from renowned European workshops, especially in the Rhineland and Franconia, as confirmed by blades bearing the name Ulfberht. Occasional finds indicate the appearance of sabers in Poland during this period, undoubtedly influenced by contacts with steppe nomads such as the Pechenegs and Hungarians. Spears with wooden shafts and iron tips, sometimes exceeding three meters

Fig. 5
A stirrup of the
Western European type
from Lake Lednica



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Fig. 6
A stirrup of the
Eastern European type
from Lake Lednica



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in length (Fig. 3), were the most common weapons used by most warriors. They were used in close combat by both infantry and cavalry. In addition to spears, javelins were used for throwing, increasing their combat range. Axes are the most frequently found weapons, some of which were likely used both in battle and in everyday life (Fig. 4). These include broad-bladed axes and small war hammers (*czekany*). Flails were also part of the warriors' arsenal, consisting of a handle with metal weights attached by leather straps. This weapon had Eastern origins and likely reached Poland through contacts with Kievan Rus' or steppe nomads.

Written sources and archaeological finds also point to widespread use of bows by Piast warriors, which were a key type of ranged weapon. Although simple bows predominated, antler plates found during excavations indicate the use of composite (recurved) bows as well. Their presence suggests that some warriors – especially cavalry – may have modeled themselves on steppe nomads, famed for their effectiveness in mounted ranged combat. Bows were used to shoot wooden arrows tipped with iron heads. The large number of such finds attests to the widespread use of this kind of ranged weapon. Warriors also protected their bodies in various ways. Chain mail, made of interlinked metal rings, was worn mainly by the military elite. Helmets came in different forms – from simple bell-shaped ones with nasal guards to more ornate examples made with gilded metal plates, resembling princely diadems. A crucial element of protective gear was the shield, called a *szczyt*, made of wood and reinforced with leather. These were most likely oval i, though almond-shaped variants may also have existed. Their ubiquity is confirmed by written sources that mention numerous units of shield-bearers. However, archaeological evidence is limited – only one shield from the early Middle Ages has been preserved, found in a suburb of Szczecin and dated to the 12th century.

A powerful ruler

Thanks to archaeological finds, we also know that cavalry played a significant role in Bolesław's army. Finds such as spurs, stirrups (Figs. 5 and 6), bits, and fragments of riding crops point to a well-developed equestrian culture. As with other pieces of military gear, these items include both locally made and imported examples, as well as pieces shaped by foreign cultural influences.

The armed forces of Poland's first crowned king reflected his personal power and prestige. Through them, Bolesław not only waged successful military campaigns but also projected the image of a strong, sovereign ruler capable of rivaling Europe's leading powers of his day. The diversity of weapons and gear – suited to the rank and role of individual warriors – demonstrated the adaptability of his army, which could respond to the varied challenges of warfare. From elite retinue fighters to the loosely organized *levée en masse*, each formation had its place and purpose in the state's military framework. With well-equipped troops, effective tactics, and the loyalty of his warriors, Bolesław the Brave maintained domestic stability while pursuing his ambitious expansionist goals. By using his forces with tactical skill and strategic foresight, he not only secured and consolidated his realm but also shaped the political landscape of Europe, becoming one of the most influential rulers of his time. ■