CHAPTER TWO


The rule of Bolesław Chrobry (992–1025), which is the subject of our consideration in this chapter, was an interesting and historically important period, abound in spectacular and dramatic events. The uniqueness of this epoch was best reflected in the closest ever rapprochement between the Polish and German states (the Gniezno Convention in 1000), and later—after the death of Otto III (1002) and the replacement of some of the ruling elites of the empire at the beginning of Henry II (1002–1024)’s reign—in the outbreak of a serious military conflict, which lasted for more than a few years.

In the atmosphere of disputes and uncertainties regarding the eastern policy of the empire of the Liudolfings, two extreme attitudes towards the Piasts and their state began to develop. Their character—undergoing a natural process of variation and evolution—marked the borders of German reflection on Poland, in fact, almost until the present.

The problem is important and at the same time extraordinarily broad. Here we can only concentrate on its origin, so complex and multifaceted that the analysis has to be divided into a couple of stages, which are best approached in a chronological order.

2.1 The Polish Ruler and His Country in German Sources c. 1000

It usually happens that those historians who are interested in the state of the Piasts in the period of the early years of Bolesław Chrobry’s rule focus on the visit that emperor Otto III paid to Poland in 1000. This event obscures a number of problems which are associated with the initial stage in the rule of the second historic monarch of the Piast dynasty. This is the case due to the value of the emperor’s expedition to Gniezno, but also its exclusive nature in the history of Polish—German relations. However, there are some matters regarding Bolesław Chrobry’s rule which do not equal the Gniezno meeting, but are also very intriguing. Especially the first years in the rule of Mieszko I’s successor are full of mysterious excerpts that appear in written
sources, which due to their vagueness and brevity are open to speculation and numerous interpretations.

The present chapter will mainly focus our analysis on how the situation in Poland shortly after Mieszko I’s death was perceived and monitored in Germany. We will deal with a slightly later period to examine the character of descriptions and judgment on Boleslav Chrobry given by two German personalities: Brun of Querfurt and Thietmar of Merseburg. It will also be important in the context of these issues to have a look at the circumstances in which the name of the Piasts’ state and its inhabitants appeared in sources around 1000 in the forms close to the contemporary ones.

### 2.1.1 Vulpes callida—Power Struggle in Poland after Mieszko I’s Death

It should be expected that the change of the ruler in the neighbouring country, quite important for the eastern policy of the empire, concerned its political elite so much that it was reflected in the then German writing. Surprisingly enough, in what has been preserved from the literary legacy in the country of the Piasts’ western neighbour not a single message contemporary to the event, which would say anything about the taking over of the Polish throne by Boleslav Chrobry, can be traced. The only information concerning the issue in question is contained in the chronicle by Thietmar, who wrote it some twenty years after the events. The bishop of Merseburg noticed in a quite laconic passage that:

> on 25 May in the year of Incarnation 992 [...] the aforementioned duke [Mieszko] now old and feverish, went from this place of exile to his homeland, leaving his kingdom to be divided among many claimants. Yet, with fox-like cunning, his son Boleslav unified it once more in the hands of one ruler, after he had expelled his stepmother and brothers, and had their familiars Odilien and Przibiwoj blinded.¹

It is noteworthy that the chronicler did not want to give the details of Boleslav Chrobry’s actions directed against his stepbrothers and their supporters. The problem is quite intriguing as we know that Thietmar possessed perfect knowledge on the history of the region, and those events where not

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¹ *The ‘Chronicon’,* pp. 192–3; *Thietmar,* p. 225 (4,58): *anno dominice incarnationis DCCCCXCIIE [...] et VIII Kal. Iunii prefatus dux [i.e. Miseco] iam senex et febricitans ab exilio hoc ad patriam transit, reliquios regnum suimet plurimis dividendum, quod postea filius eiusdem Bolizlavus, noverca et fratribus expulsa executisque familiaribus suis Odilieno atque Prizibwoio, vulpina calliditate contraxit it unum.*