CHAPTER NINE

HOW POLAND CAME INTO BEING

1. Between archaeology, dynastic tradition and legend

The first to write about the origins of the Polish state was the chronicler known as Gallus Anonymous who compiled his narrative in the early 12th century.\(^1\) In his text he mentioned the legendary ancestors of Mieszko I, the first historical ruler of Poland. He gives a very precise account of the hospitality offered in his mean hut in Gniezno by the wheelwright Piast (originator of the Piast dynasty) to two mysterious guests, but then makes only brief mention of Mieszko’s predecessors. According to his narrative, Piast’s son Siemowit is said to have achieved the most; having gained power with social, and probably also God’s, approval, he deposed the bad king Popiel and his offspring, they were banished from the kingdom (but it is not known where they settled). It is related how the tyrant ended his life: sent to an island he perishes, eaten by mice. Siemowit (according to the chronicle the real founder of the dynasty) owing to his hard work and knightly deeds became remembered by the future generations as the one who considerably expanded the kingdom (but we are not told what new territories he gained). His successor Lestek, the narrative continues, equaled his father in his military prowess, goodness and courage. There is, however, no information allowing us to assess his contribution in forming the territorial base of the state (perhaps everything been already done in that respect). The stress laid by the chronicler on Lestek’s knightly valor perhaps allows us to believe that the ruler at least effectively defended his inheritance. Still briefer are the mentions concerning Mieszko’s father, Siemomysł, who in the chronicle is described as the one ‘who increased the glory of his ancestors three times both in his birth and dignity’. At best it may be guessed

\(^1\) The conventional name for this epic narrative of great historical and literary importance written in Latin in the court of the Polish ruler Bolesław Wrymouth between 1112 and 1116 derives from the fact that its anonymous author is believed to have been a Benedictine monk, most likely from Provence. In recent years the debate about the identity of its author has however been reopened. The text mainly glorifies the gesta of Bolesław Wrymouth, but mentions his predecessors to put this in context (P.B.).
that his rule was a time of peace, for the chronicle does not mention any military matters. At the same time, as *Gallus Anonymous* remarks, it was a period in which the country ruled by Siemomysl was sunken in pagan blindness: this is how his story about Mieszko’s regaining sight at the age of seven can be understood, just as the boy miraculously gained sight during a pagan feast, so the nation he was one day to rule was to gain its spiritual sight when it accepted Christianity.²

The above-discussed text presenting the origins of the state and dynasty suggested to scholars that the history of Poland should be considered as beginning not so much with the pivotal year 966, that is the date of adopting Christianity, but at least three generations earlier. The attempts at finding archaeological justification for the hypothesis of the early origins of the state were first made before the Second World War and then after it within the boundaries of the research program on the origins of the Polish state, which embraced dozens of sites all over Poland (Fig. 82). The key aim of these investigations was to find the earliest ‘tribal’ phase of the leading centers. However, the problem turned out to be a complex one and the archaeological interpretations carried a high risk of error from the very outset. Often any traces of pre-state settlement in the earliest Polish towns were identified as testimonies of the first phase of the fortified center. However, in many cases such finds may only indicate that there was some settlement in the investigated area in the pre-state period. Combining these uncertain, often not scientifically justified, claims with the content of written sources resulted in the belief, harbored for many years, that the state formed in the period from the 8th till the early 10th century. According to this conception the state was the outcome of slow internal socio-economic and cultural development, including the political ‘maturing’ of ‘tribal’ communities. At the same time the towns were evolving from the nuclear forms of the pre-state period to developed early urban-stronghold centers of the Piast times. In this approach the earlier (‘tribal’) strongholds were treated mainly as a stage at which the town-shaping processes were initiated and then accelerated as a result of the origination of the early Piast state.³

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² *Gallus* I, 4.

³ These conceptions are reflected in many publications of that time both by historians (cf., Łowmiański 1973; Miśkiewicz 1976) and archaeologists (e.g. Hensel 1963, 1964, 1974; Leciejewicz 1972).