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HISTORICAL OBSERVATIONS REGARDING THE EVOLUTION OF MEDIEVAL POLISH TOWNS

(Summary)

The present study aims to offer a perspective on the emergence and the development of towns in Medieval Poland. The archeological excavations proved the existence of a series of important settlements in Gniezno, Szczecin, Wolin, Gdansk, Poznan, Wroclaw, Opole or Cracow, even as early as the eighth and ninth centuries, before the foundation of the Medieval Polish State. In the beginning, these settlements served as residence for the tribal leaders, as they were fortified by palisades, earth ramparts or, in a few cases, by stones. Around 1000, Gniezno already presented the features of a pre-urban settlement, with fortifications, local markets and associations of craftsmen and merchants, being also the seat of a bishopric. Sources designate fortified centers with political, military, administrative and religious functions as *grod*, *grody* (“fortress”, “stronghold”), a designation used subsequently for the fortified residences of castellans’ and lords of the land. The economical requirements of these *grod* led to the emergence in their proximity, of settlements of another kind, the *suburbia* (*podgrodzie*), much more populated, fulfilling a variety of functions but with a strong emphasis on the economic function and with a broadening of the local craftsmanship. In the vicinity of *suburbia*, weekly markets (*fora*) used to be held, strengthening the connections with the settlements in the hinterland.

From the twelfth century onwards agglomerations of settlements presenting urban features appeared, encompassing dwelling places with different functions and status, having quite large territories. The settlement’s backbone was represented at once by the lord of the land’s castle and by the local market, which developed out of castle’s suburbia. Some Polish scholars, among whom Alexander Gieysztor and Karol Buczek, consider that even in the twelfth century the dwellers of these settlements and most likely the “guests” also were granted certain rights by the duke, by means of a market law (*mir* = “peace”, “truce”). It is plausible that a local judge (*judex fori*), having the local castellan’s support, fulfilled the juridical, administrative and financial functions. This assertion is rejected by another scholar, Benedykt Zientara; he considers that the first juridical distinction of citizens was made by granting autonomy to foreign merchants and craftsmen (German, Valonians), who settled in the urban centers where the exchange trade was made. The common term used by German and Polish scholars to designate the settling of urban centers during the thirteenth-sixteenth centuries, accomplished in the larger framework of the German colonization, is *locatio civitatis*.

By the beginning of the thirteen century, Henry the Beard, Duke of Silesia, set forth a plan meant to encourage the colonists settlement, establishing lower and clear-defined taxes, opposed to the previous taxation system, entailing numerous financial obligations and labor services. Henry learned from the previous experience of Wichmann, Archbishop of Magdeburg between 1152 and 1192, considered to be the most successful promoter of the colonization process in the twelfth century. Stepping in Wichmann’s footsteps, Henry granted the colonists established in the mining center Zlotoryja a chart of privileges (about the year 1211), which resembled the chart granted by the Archbishop Wichmann to the colonists in Magdeburg in 1188. The same blueprint was followed for new settlements in Silesia (*nova fora*) and in Small Poland,

which Duke Henry controlled: in Wroclaw (1211 and 1232), Nysa (about 1223), Legnica (about 1241) and so on and so forth.

The new settlements were led by a *sculetus* (German *Schultheiss*/*Schulze*, Polish *soltys*) or *advocatus* (German *Vogt*, Polish *wojt*), pledging allegiance to the Duke who, in most of the cases, appointed him. The counterpart of this institution was the “community of citizens” (*communitas civium*), which developed its own institution to lead and represent it: the city council. That was the first institution characterizing exclusively the city, without any counterpart in the rural institutions; it led the citizens’ efforts in obtaining the autonomous status, eluding the Duke’s right to intervene in their internal affairs. This was achieved by buying the Duke’s rights to the town’s financial revenues or transforming these rights into a tax which the citizens agreed to be annually paid to the Duke or by purchasing the municipal rights not yet obtained.

There are noticeable differences in the urbanization degree of different Polish regions and among the cities. Therefore, about the year 1500 there was a developed urban system in the Western areas, in Great Poland, and less urbanized areas in the East, in Mazovia and Ruthenia. In the last region the urbanization process received royal support, as part of the policy of integrating the new territory in the administrative boundaries of the kingdom. At the time, in Poland (without counting Lithuania) there were around 600 urban centers. Within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the urbanization process was rather dilatory, being hastened only by the end of the sixteenth century. One estimates that 900 towns appeared altogether in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the given period, which was concordant with the territorial reality since the area of the Duchy was larger than that of the Kingdom.

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