

## FOUNDATIONS OF MONASTERIES BY MEMBERS OF THE TWELFTH-CENTURY POLISH NOBILITY: A SELECTION OF CASES<sup>1</sup>

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The issue of the noble monastic foundation has been researched in Polish historiography mainly from the point of view of ecclesiastical history. The monasteries I will present here have been the subject of several studies in the fields of art history, archaeology, and literary history. There is also a certain number of studies concerning the genealogy of different noble families or their individual members, but these studies were predominantly investigating political history. Most of this extensive literature tends to neglect the relation between founder and founded institution, particularly the role of the founder in the foundation process and his or her self-representation in the role of founder and patron.

The three cases which will be presented in my paper are chosen from the large number of noble foundations in twelfth-century Poland. The reason I selected these cases is that very little is known about the majority of monastic foundations at this time. Nevertheless, even in these cases information is meagre. Because of this scarcity, one must focus on constructing hypotheses. For this reason, there is also the methodological danger of creating circular argumentation.

Geographically, the cases which I will present are from Greater Poland and Silesia. The monasteries were established for Benedictine, Premonstratensian, canons regular, and Cistercian orders.

The sources which are suitable to research founders' motivation and self-representation are charters and tympana. Foundation charters have been commonly regarded as so conventional as to be almost unworthy of attention. *Formulae* used in these documents are clichés, but this does not mean that they were meaningless. Eschatological motivation encouraging people to give property to the monastery is stated directly there, but there are also hints about hidden motives and aims of founders. One of them is the need for prestige and self-definition as a member of the nobility.

Foundation tympana are very significant, but quite neglected by historians as a type of source. Tympana depict a person who might be dead or alive in the time of sculpting, addressing a centrally placed figure, either Christ, the Virgin, or some saint. The donor's gesture represents an actual sign of his or her action and feelings. I now want to discuss the foundation processes of the four monasteries in order to see the founders' motivation and their self-representation in charters and foundation tympana.

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## Case A

The Cistercian monastery in Łekno is probably the first foundation of this order in Poland. The foundation process lasted from about 1143-45 to 1153. The mother monastery of Łekno was Altenberg abbey (Nordrhein-Westfalen). It was the second of Altenberg's daughter-houses, and at the time of its foundation, Łekno was the abbey farthest to the East of all those which belonged to the order.

The founder of this monastery was a nobleman called Zbylut from the Pałuki kindred. His name appears in several charters between 1140 and 1153, but no details about his life are known. Zbylut witnessed donations for the Trzemeszno and Mogilno Benedictine monasteries (both in Greater Poland), for the Cistercian monastery in Jędrzejów (in Lesser Poland), and he also donated St. James church to the Mogilno monastery.<sup>2</sup>

The foundation charter of the Łekno monastery is preserved in the original.<sup>3</sup> The charter was issued by the founder and authenticated by the archiepiscopal seal. The intention of the founder is described in the *arenga* and the *narratio*. These passages express an eschatological motivation, which encouraged him to give some part of his property to the monastery. This is the motivation he wanted to show to his contemporaries and to posterity. Although the form was conventional, there is no reason to regard this motivation as an empty conventional gesture.

Within this text two layers can be distinguished. First, the founder, as a member of the Christian community, wanted to support the Church by giving a part of his property to the highly respected ecclesiastical institution (in this case, a monastery); second, by this commitment, the founder hoped to secure eternal salvation for himself and his family.

Brygida Kürbis, who examined the charter, pointed out two unusual characteristics: the absence of an expression typical for the foundation charter, *pro remissione peccatorum*, and the formula used by the founder to describe himself: *ego Zbylut Polonię ciuis*, which has no parallels in other twelfth-century charters. She interprets this peculiar expression in the sense that Zbylut was an equal to the congregation, having very high

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<sup>2</sup> Andrzej M. Wyrwa, *Procesy fundacyjne wielkopolskich klasztorów linii altenberskiej: Łekno-Łąd-Obra* [The Foundation Processes of the Cistercian Monasteries of the Altenberg Line in Greater Poland: Łekno-Łąd-Obra] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 1995), 64-73.

<sup>3</sup> Józef Dobosz, "Dokument fundacyjny klasztoru cystersów w Łeknie," [The Foundation Charter of the Cistercian Monastery in Łekno] *Studia i Materiały do dziejów Pałuk* 1 (1989): 63-64.

status in the society.<sup>4</sup> This interesting interpretation, however, has not been sufficiently proved. The use of a term taken from Roman law certainly indicates the idea that the founder belonged to the nobility and possessed rights as a member of it. But I believe that the term does not refer to a relationship between the founder and the convent as Kürbis suggests.

Another reason which is not present but is implied in the foundation charter, is the need for prestige. The need for prestige and the various ways to show one's high social position was an important part of life for the medieval nobility. Being a founder meant that a given person could obtain a certain level of material and political power and wealth. The high costs of such an enterprise were an investment in the founder's social position and family status.

The importance of the foundation is also emphasized by Zbylut's spectacular gesture of giving a part of his *patrimonium*, which was regarded as the most precious part of one's property. This is an argument that foundations were taken seriously and were not empty gestures.

Zbylut is known (as a witness) from several foundation charters which were issued before or in the time of the foundation process in Łekno. This means that he was present at many churches' consecrations and witnessed the legal side of the foundation acts. This fact, in my understanding, could have played an important role in Zbylut's decision to undertake the foundation of the Cistercian monastery in Łekno. Therefore, the foundation of the Łekno monastery was not only a religious gesture, but also a way to express the founder's belonging to the highest strata of medieval society.

## Case B

There is abundant literature devoted to the various problems of the Premonstratensian nunnery in Strzelno.<sup>5</sup> Controversy centers on three points: the identity of the founder,

<sup>4</sup> Brygida Kürbis, "Cystersi w kulturze polskiego średniowiecza. Trzy przykłady z XII wieku," [Cistercians in the Culture of the Polish Middle Ages: Three Examples from the Twelfth Century], in *Na progach historii* [On the Doorsteps of History] (Poznań: Abos, 1994), 341-2.

<sup>5</sup> See for example *Strzelno romańskie. Zbiór studiów*, [Romanesque Strzelno: a Collection of Studies] ed. Zygmunt Świechowski (Strzelno: PTTK, 1972); Brygida Kürbis, "Najstarsza tradycja klasztoru panien norbertanek w Strzelnie," [The Oldest Tradition of the Premonstratensian Nunnery in Strzelno], in *Na progach historii*; Krystyna Józefowiczówna, "Trzy romańskie klasztory," [Three Romanesque Churches], in *Studia z dziejów ziemi mogileńskiej*, [A Study of History of the Mogiła Region], ed. Czesław Łuczak, (Poznań, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1978), 165-265; Jadwiga Chudziakowa, "Zespół architektury romańskiej w Strzelnie w świetle najnowszych badań." [The Romanesque Complex of Architecture in Strzelno in the Light of the Recent Research] *Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici* 13 (1990): 6-19; Bożena Zimnowoda-Krajewska and Jam Salm, "Problematyka badań architektonicznych ponorbertańskiego kościoła p.w. Trójcy w Strzelnie" [The Results of the Recent Research on Architecture of the Ex-Premonstratensian Monastic Church of Holy Trinity in Strzelno] *Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici* 20 (1992): 21-47.

the time of the foundation process, and the time of the building of the two monastic churches. These controversies derive from the fact that the sources are very inconsistent in regard to the identity of the founder of the Strzelno nunnery and the date of the foundation. The dating varies in the sources from 1133 to the beginning of the thirteenth century. I do not want to go into the details of the discussion, but I will present two main hypotheses proposed in the literature. Brygida Kürbis suggested the hypothesis that 1133, the earliest year known from the sources, refers to the Holy Cross and the Virgin Mary church (present-day St. Prokop church) in Strzelno founded by Peter Wszebor, and then, his son Peter "the Old" Wszeborowic founded the Premonstratensian nunnery and the Trinity church around 1190.<sup>6</sup> This hypothesis, well-established in the literature, has been recently challenged by Janusz Bieniak. He constructed a new hypothesis which tried to connect the foundation of the Strzelno nunnery with the powerful Silesian noble Peter Włostowic. Bieniak assumed the existence of an older son of Peter Włostowic, named Wszebor, different from the two who are known from the sources. This Wszebor could have been a founder of the Strzelno nunnery.<sup>7</sup>

Given the problem of the inconsistency of the sources and the multiplicity of hypotheses, the safest way to overcome the thus far unresolved problem of the dating is to state that some members of Wszeborowice kindred founded the Premonstratensian nunnery in Strzelno and somewhere around this time also founded the St. Prokop rotunda.

In the case of the Strzelno monastery, the only existing sources relevant to the founders' motivation and self-representation are the foundation tympana and the architecture of both churches. Unfortunately, the foundation charter has not survived,



1. Tympanum from St. Prokop Church in Strzelno

but there are two tympana related to the Strzelno monastery, one from the St. Prokop rotunda and another one from the Holy Trinity church. The scene on the first tympanum consists of three persons. The central position, the highest point of the semicircular frame, is occupied by the significantly taller figure of Christ

<sup>6</sup> Brygida Kürbis, "Dzieje fundacji strzeleńskiej w świetle dokumentów" [History of Strzelno's Foundation in the Light of Sources] (Strzelno, PTTK, 1992), 44-45; Idem, "Najstarsza tradycja," 135-6.

<sup>7</sup> Janusz Bieniak, "Polska elita polityczna XII wieku. Część III, Arbitrzy książąt - krąg rodzinny Piotra Włostowica," [Polish Twelfth-century Political Elite: Part three: The Arbiters of Dukes, the Family Circle of Piotr Włostowic] in *Spółczesność Polski średniowiecznej*, vol. 4, ed. Stefan K. Kuczyński (Warsaw: PWN, 1990), 53-65.

sitting on the throne, who represents the iconographical type *Rex Gloriarum*. He is addressed by two figures of the donors, one on each side. The man seen on the left is bent almost in half and holds a realistic model of the St. Prokop rotunda. A female figure, seen on the right, shows deep respect through her body posture; in addition, she is holding an open book in her hands. Her head is covered closely by a veil suggesting either her affiliation with a convent or her marital status. There is no inscription which may reveal the identity of the couple. This object is dated to the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth century.<sup>8</sup> In the other tympanum the central position is occupied by St. Anne holding the Virgin Mary as a baby. Her gesture of carrying the Virgin as a baby is very maternal and appears quite casual, just as if she were any woman carrying a baby. The donors are kneeling, one on each side. The man on the left is holding a model of the church, and the woman on the right, in a similar position, holds a book. Her dress implies the marital status. There is an inscription on the semicircular frame mentioning the name *Petrus* and the *patrocinium* of the church.<sup>9</sup> This object is dated to the same time as the one above.<sup>10</sup>

To conclude this case, I would like to stress, especially, the importance of the foundation tympana. They served as "visual charters" commemorating the act of foundation. Their non-written character provided the possibility that the message would be visible and understood by a much wider public. Literally, everybody entering the church or passing by could see the tympanum. In the case of charters their message was addressed to a very select group of people and not displayed publicly, but tympana served very well for the purpose of self-representation. They were visible not only to fellow noblemen, but all people below and above in the social hierarchy.



2. Tympanum from Holy Trinity Church in Strzelno

<sup>8</sup> *Sztuka polska przedromańska i romańska do schyłku XIII wieku* [Polish Pre-Romanesque and Romanesque Art to the End of the Thirteenth Century], ed. Michał Walicki, vol. 2 (Warsaw: PWN, 1971), 760; Zygmunt Świechowski, *Sztuka romańska w Polsce* [Polish Romanesque Art] (Warsaw: Arkady, 1990), 70.

<sup>9</sup> TE VELVT OPTERET  
HOC DONO PETRUS HONORAT  
VIRGINIS ANNA PIE  
MATER VENERANDA MARIE

Kazimierz Ciechanowski, *Epigrafika romańska i wczesnogotycka w Polsce* [The Romanesque and Early-Gothic Epigraph in Poland] (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1965), 38-40.

<sup>10</sup> *Sztuka polska przedromańska i romańska*, 2:760.

## Case C

The Silesian Palatine Peter Włostowic is one of the most interesting and well-known persons of the Polish twelfth century. There is a vast Polish and German literature devoted to his political career, family connections, and foundation activity.<sup>11</sup> Peter Włostowic was the founder of two large monastic institutions of medieval Wrocław (Breslau): the Benedictine monastery in Olbin and that of the canon regulars in Piasek. The foundation process of the Benedictine abbey started sometime in the 1120s and lasted until 1145.<sup>12</sup> Benedictine monks came to Wrocław from Tyniec near Crakow. A very important ceremony, indicating the international connections of the founder and his ambition, happened in the spring of 1145. Peter Włostowic spent Christmas of 1144 at the court of the German king Conrad III in Magdeburg. Due to the king's support, Peter received a piece of the relic of St. Vincentius from archbishop Friedrich. The gift arrived in Wrocław on June 6, 1145 and was placed in the monastic church.<sup>13</sup> Another important event—the consecration of the monastic church, which usually ends the foundation process—took place in 1149. This ceremony was attended by the most prominent nobles and prince Boleslas IV the Curly who confirmed the right of the monastery to its estates.<sup>14</sup>

The foundation of the Benedictine abbey in Olbin is one of the largest enterprises undertaken exclusively by a Polish nobleman in the twelfth century. The unusual scale of the foundation as well as its artistic quality indicates the exceptionally high position of the founder and his international connections.

Another large foundation undertaken by the Silesian *palatinus* was the monastery of canons regular in Wrocław Piasek. The precise time of the foundation process is unknown.<sup>15</sup> A group of canons originating from Flanders moved there from another monastery also founded by Peter on Mount Ślęza (Zobtenberge) sometime after 1121. The first document which refers undoubtedly to the functioning monastery is a papal bull issued by Celestine III in 1193, confirming its endowment.<sup>16</sup> The building of the Holy Virgin monastic church was initiated at the end of Peter's life and finished by his

<sup>11</sup> Stanisław Trawkowski, "Piotr Włostowic," [Peter Włostowic] in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* [Polish Biographical Dictionary], vol. 26 (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1981), 355-62. Contains large bibliography.

<sup>12</sup> The first known document related to the foundation of the Benedictine monastery in Wrocław is a charter issued by bishop Robert in 1139. This charter recorded that the monastery was built by Piotr. *Codex Diplomaticus nec non epistolarius Silesiae*, ed. Karol Maleczyński, vol. 1 (Wrocław: Wrocławskie Towarzystwo Miłośników Historii, 1956) no 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Annales Magdeburgenses*, ed. Georg H. Petz, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptorum*, vol. 16 (Hannover, 1959), 187.

<sup>14</sup> *Codex Diplomaticus Silesiae*, no 69.

<sup>15</sup> The first document related to this institution is the charter issued by Bishop Walter in 1149/50 at the request of the founders. *Codex Diplomaticus Silesiae*, no 26.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, no 71

wife and son in the sixties and early seventies of the twelfth century. This is also proved by the foundation tympanum of this church, depicting only Mary the widow of Peter Włostowic and their son Świętosław. This object presents the highest quality among all Polish foundation tympana from the twelfth century.

It conveys the same ideological message as the others, but in a very different way. The central place is occupied by a figure of the crowned Virgin with the Child. She is addressed by the donors: Mary the widow of Peter Włostowic, on the left, and Świętosław, her son, on the right. The Virgin is sitting on a throne with the crown of a ruler, but the donors are almost as tall as she is. They show great respect to the sacred; however, the distance—both spatial and indicated by the posture—present in the tympana in which Christ is depicted is not present here. Mary the widow of Peter Włostowic is standing upright and approaches the Virgin, holding in her hands a model of the church. Mary is depicted as a great lady, a noble woman conscious of her high position. Her attire is depicted with fine details indicating the abundance of cloth. The inscription draws attention to the fact that Mary shares the name with the Virgin and that the foundation is a joint enterprise of her and her son.<sup>17</sup> Świętosław is placed symmetrically on the other side of the Virgin. He is portrayed as a young boy, wearing a knee-length tunic with embroidered edges. His posture is neither standing nor kneeling; his knees are bent, but they do not touch the ground. This posture is called *genuflection*. It was widely used in medieval monastic life to replace kneeling on the holy days.<sup>18</sup>

Another important evidence of the foundation activity in Wrocław is related to Peter's son-in-law Jaksa.<sup>19</sup> I will leave aside all the discussion about the "Jaksa problem"



3. Tympanum from Virgin Mary Church in Wrocław-Piasek

<sup>17</sup> HAS MATRI VENIAE  
TIBI DO MARIA MARIAE  
HAS OFFERT AEADES  
SWENTOSLAWS MEA PROLES

Ciechanowski, *Epigrafika romańska*, 22.

<sup>18</sup> Przemysław Mrozowski, "Genuflection in Medieval Western Culture: The Gesture of Expiation - the Praying Posture" *Acta Poloniae Historica* 68 (1993): 13-15.

<sup>19</sup> See Gerard Labuda, "Jaksa z Kopanicy", "Jaksa z Miechowa," [Jaksa from Kopanica, Jaksa from Miechów] in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* [Polish Biographical Dictionary], vol. 10. (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1962-64), 340-1.



4. Tympanum from St. Michael Church in Wrocław-Ołbin

The donation tympanum commemorating this event, depicting him and his wife Agafia, was discovered in Wrocław in 1962.<sup>20</sup> This tympanum was known from eighteenth-century drawings but had disappeared in the beginning of the last century. The object was discovered in rather good condition, though three out of the four figures of the donors are damaged.

The central position in the tympanum, as usual, is occupied by the figure of Christ, which presents, according to scholarship, the mixture of two types of iconographical representation: Christ in Majesty and Christ the Teacher. The figure is surrounded by a *mandorla* with the inscription: IANVA SVM UITE PER ME QUICUMQ /ve/ VENITE. He sits on a rainbow which, as literature suggests, might symbolise Heaven and Earth. Christ's robe is typical for this sort of representation; its form originates from Byzantine art, and its very formal character emphasizes the role of Christ the Ruler. The open book with the inscription Ego SVM QVI SVM comes from the Hebrew Bible, and the gesture of benediction originates from Roman representations of philosophers and teachers. The tympanum was placed above the main door of the church; it illustrates the meaning of the inscription, Christ as a gate to eternal life.<sup>21</sup> The figures of the donors are half the height of Christ, placed symmetrically on each side. Jaksa, seen on the right, carries a model of the St. Michael church; prince Boleslas the Curly, seen on the left, carries a model of the church with the inscription IN BITOM. Their identity is revealed by the inscription on the inner semicir-

<sup>21</sup> Krystyna Mączewska-Pilch, *Tympanon fundacyjny z Ołbinia na tle przedstawień o charakterze donacyjnym*, [The Foundation Tympanum from Ołbin in the Relationship to the Other Representations of Donations] (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1973), 18-25.

<sup>20</sup> Krystyna Mączewska-Pilch, "Tympanon romański z Ołbinia" [The Romanesque Tympanum from Ołbin] *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* 25 (1963): 53-6.

cular frame.<sup>22</sup> Both men are standing, their dress is depicted with the details of embroidery decoration. The female figure kneeling behind Jaksa is his wife. Her dress has long, fashionable sleeves, and her head is covered to indicate married status. Her name is inscribed, in Cyrillic, above her: AGA[P]EA. In contrast to the gesture of the men, who are handing gifts to Christ, her gesture of praying and her bent head indicate deep reverence. The use of Cyrillic letters is often interpreted as a personal choice of Agafia, who wanted to indicate her attachment to her mother's heritage, that of a Ruthenian princess. The last person depicted there is a son of prince Boleslas. His figure, almost completely destroyed, is standing behind his father, with the name LESTEK inscribed above.<sup>23</sup>

The tympanum from Olbin in comparison with the other tympana examined in this paper presents its message particularly clearly. There are three levels, connected with each other—political, social, and religious. The first one alludes to the mutual political support between prince Boleslas the Curly and Jaksa, the second indicates the very high social position of Jaksa and his wife, and the third one implies that donors made pious gestures which increased their chances for eternal life.

## Conclusion

The first focus of my investigation was founder motivation and attitude to the founded institution. This issue should be regarded in two aspects: "eschatological advantages" deriving from the pious gesture and down-to-earth attitudes to monastic property. The foundations of the monasteries were, in all cases presented by me, supported by other members of the kindred. Wives, children and other relatives gave some of their own properties to support the foundation and to enjoy certain privileges and to increase their own chances for eternal salvation. The foundation charters described this as *sacrum commercium*—the exchange of earthly property for eternal goods, but actually founders did not really give away these properties since they usually kept some sort of control over the finances of the monastery. The founder's family continued to control the monastery and could send unmarried children, especially female, to pursue ecclesiastical careers there. Beatrice, a daughter of the founder of the Strzelno monastery, was its first prioress, although the possibility of a real religious calling should not be completely

<sup>22</sup> [ad hanc novella]  
[du]X FERT SUA DONA CAPELLAM  
QUE FERT IACO CH[rist]OS  
SUSCIPE TEMPLA PIU[s]

Ciechanowski, *Epigrafia romańska i wczesnogotycka w Polsce*, 23-28.

<sup>23</sup> Mączewska-Pilch, *Tympanon fundacyjny*, 9-13.

disregarded. Monastic life was attractive to medieval people in many aspects. Pre-monstratensian nunneries in particular were very often places which admitted exclusively upper-class woman. This is true in the case of the Strzelno nunnery which in the thirteenth century became a fashionable religious house for noble women from Greater Poland and Kujavia.

The second focus of my investigation—the founders' self-representation—is of course related to the previous issue and is examined on the bases of two types of sources: foundation tympana and charters. Although they use different media, the messages all similar and should not be analyzed in isolation. The scenes of the foundation tympana carry the message that the church was built due to the generosity of the people depicted thereon. It also makes manifest the special relationship with the sacred which was a result of the pious gift. They commemorated not only the foundation as such, but the particular moment of the consecration of a church, which was understood as a saint, the Virgin, or Christ receiving a church. The consecration ceremonies were important festivities, a gathering of the whole kindred, of important people from the neighborhood, and sometimes even of rulers, as was the case of the consecration of the Benedictine abbey's church in Ołbin in 1149. These people were listed among the witnesses of the foundation charters usually issued on these occasions. These gatherings of the noblemen at the consecrations were, in my understanding, an important factor in spreading the idea of "being a founder," visible in the case of Zbylut, founder of the Łekno monastery, who after witnessing many consecrations undertook his own foundation.