

# Interreligious Dialogue Expressed in the Earliest Polish Art

Przemysław Urbańczyk

*Abstract - Despite the traditional belief in quick Christianisation of the Polish lands, the conversion process there was certainly long and difficult, with old traditions slowly giving way to elements of the new religion. That ideological struggle seems to be expressed in artistic symbolism which shows a visible degree of syncretism, with old and new elements challenging each other or taking on new meanings. This article exemplifies some transition situations expressed in variously decorated artefacts.*

There are two key stones in the founding vision of the Polish state origins. One is the dogma of the year 966 when the first historic ruler of the Piast dynasty, Prince Mieszko I (before 963-992), was baptized – one year after he had married the Christian Princess Dubravka of the Bohemian Přemyslid ruling dynasty. The second one is the deeply rooted conviction that the early Piast state, with its inhabitants effectively converted, quickly joined the catholic Europe.

The thousand-years-long strive to fix some accurate beginning date of the Polish statehood and, consequently, of the Polish nation, was concluded on the 22nd February 2019 when the Polish Parliament established April 14th as the «National Day of the Baptism of Poland». There was also a commemorative banknote issued on the occasion of celebrating the 1050th anniversary of that event. In this way, the individual conversion of a monarch was made equal to the conversion of all his subjects, which established a firm foundation for the origins of the nation.

Thus, the aim to establish a solid foundation for the national history has been finally achieved and formally fixed by the political decision which ended inconclusive disputes of the specialists studying the Early Middle Ages. This tampering with evidence does not only prove ignorance of the proponents of this act, but it also illustrates very well a typical game played with the history in order to ascertain its conformity with the dominant memory rhetoric. Political guardians of the correct collective mem-

ory do not restrict themselves with applying various socio-techniques but they make use of their position in the power structure to legally impose a desirable vision of the past. Ignoring specialist knowledge, they force their version in order to create a desired «memory community».

In the case discussed here, the cold-blooded analysis of the survived written sources and the available archaeological evidence allows to easily challenge the simplistic interpretation of the earliest Polish history by showing the obvious lack of solid scientific arguments. The year 966 has actually been chosen among several alternative dates (966, 967, or 968) recorded during the eleventh century in the bishop Thietmar's *Chronicle* (IV, 56) and in the *Polish Annals*. Still much less substantiated is the vision of the quick transformation of the pagans into convicted Christians, which was suggested by mediaeval clerics-chroniclers, who operated a clear scheme of «before and after» the Christianization.

In fact, there are no reliable historic records, precisely dated archaeological evidence, numismatic collections or artistic expressions which might support the well-established vision of the extensive and effective Christianization of the whole country shortly after Mieszko's conversion ca. 966. Quite the opposite, it seems that the Duke did either not succeed in converting his subjects at all, or he did not even try to do so. Thus, similarly to the petty state of the West-Slavic Abodrites in the tenth century and to the eleventh century- Sweden, the Christian Piast dynasty ruled a country which was predominantly pagan. Therefore, with the exception of two chapels discovered in the «capital» stronghold in Poznań, and on the Ostrów Lednicki island, there are no finds dated to Mieszko's rule which may be affiliated to Christianity – no churches, no small crosses, no reliquaries and no change in the Slavic pagan tradition of burning dead bodies before burial.

Therefore, we should suspect a double-faith situation, when the Christian elite (the ruler with his family and his closest collaborators) governed pagan subjects. This situation of an ideological «compromise» started to visibly change only when the second Piast ruler, Boleslav Chrobry (992-1025), took supreme power after his father's death on May 25th 992. This Christian-born prince and later king invested much energy and a lot of money to promote the new religion. Judging from the available records (first of all the Thietmar's *Chronicle*), he used both persuasion and sheer force, being quite cruel when necessary.

Obviously, despite building churches, importing missionaries, enforcing Christian obligations (e.g. fasting and monogamy) and promoting ritual of burying complete dead bodies (inhumation), the conversion

process was certainly long and difficult, with old traditions slowly giving way to elements of the new religion promoted by the ruler and the Church. Such a situation has not been specific for the Piast state. This long and difficult ideological struggle seems to be expressed in artistic symbolism which shows a visible degree of syncretism, with old and new elements challenging each other or taking on new meanings.



Fig. 1. The last coin issued by Boleslav Chrobry

Quite obvious in this respect is the symbolism applied by the designer of coins issued ca. 1020 by Boleslav Chrobry (Fig. 1). They show a surprising combination of a Christian cross with the swastikas, which are solar signs deeply rooted in the ancient past. One may guess that this emission, which was probably intended to support inheritance rights of his son Mieszko II (1025-1038), intentionally appealed to the mixed emotions of people sharing syncretic worldview and/or sent meaningful signals to both parties of the inter-religious dialogue.

One may recall here a similar interpretation of a much later (but even more meaningful) example of the combination of the two traditions, which may be found in Kruszwica. There, an elaborated swastika is demonstratively cut in the northern facade of the twelfth - century Romanesque basilica (Fig. 2). The fact that this is the only decorated stone in this wall, and that the swastika is made very well visible, allows to suspect that it was a deliberate signal for viewers the meaning of which, however, is difficult to identify. It could have even been a manifestation of the victory over the evil powers.



Fig. 2. Developed version of a swastika visible in the wall of the Kruszwica basilica

Both versions of a swastika may be found at bottoms of numerous clay vessels produced in Poland by Early Medieval potters. They belong to the wide range of various signs commonly used in potters' workshops to identify their production<sup>1</sup>. This allows to guess that these two signs functioned much wider in the Mediaeval society than just among the elite, which was at the forefront of the ideological contest. How much was it an appeal to the symbolism of the «old» faith remains unknown.

An interesting modification of swastika is represented by the so-called «Salomon's knot» (*sigillum Salomonis*) which since antiquity might have represented eternity or divine wisdom. The symbol may be found in Jewish, Roman, early Christian and Muslim art. In Poland metalworks decorated with this sign and dated to the tenth-eleventh century have been discovered in the early medieval strongholds Chodlik and Czermno (south-eastern Poland), but their functions or symbolic connotations remain unclear<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 3a and 3b).

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Fig. 2 at [https://archiwa.winland.pl/obcy/obcy/2014/002\\_glowizna.php?kod\\_matrixa=win01xxxx348](https://archiwa.winland.pl/obcy/obcy/2014/002_glowizna.php?kod_matrixa=win01xxxx348).

<sup>2</sup> J. Bagińska - M. Piotrowski - M. Wołoszyn (eds.), „Červen' – eine Burg zwischen Ost und West (Ausstellungskatalog), Tomaszów Lubelski - Leipzig - Lublin - Rzeszów, 2012, p. 475 and photo p. 496.



Fig. 3a. The so called «Salomon's knots» in bronze discovered in Chodilik, region of Karczmiska



Fig. 3b. Badge from Czermno, stored at the Janusz Peter Regional Museum in Tomaszów Lubelski

A simpler version of the ancient solar symbol is the three-armed swastika also known as *triquetra* or *triskelion*, which is also visible among the above-mentioned potters' marks. Especially interesting for our discussion is the Irish(?) *triquetra* developed into a form of a three-looped knot. It is sometimes called the «Trinity knot», because like the St Patrick's three-leafed shamrock, it could have been used as a pictorial expression of the perpetual nature of the Holy Trinity. This symbol may be easily found on jewelry, monumental High Crosses and in books – e.g. the most famous *Book of Kells* made in the ninth century<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> B. Meehan, *The Book of Kells: An Illustrated Introduction to the Manuscript in Trinity College Dublin*, New York, Thames & Hudson, 1994.

Such a directly Christian interpretation, however, cannot be uncritically applied to the Medieval finds made in Poland – e.g. a fragment of a golden decoration found in Ostrów Lednicki (one of the primary centers of the early Piast state), a bronze capsule discovered in Janów Pomorski (a Baltic emporium in northern Poland), or a piece of a decorated horn excavated in Santok (western Poland). The meaning of these symbols should be discussed within the broader context of the transformation period when they seem to have coexisted.

Sometimes these two different meanings of the triskelion knot met in one historic context, like in the case of the Swedish runic stones which originally stood in one place in Funbo, Uppland. One of these stelae shows a stylized *triquetra* and another one a stylized cross, both carved in the middle of decorative runic inscriptions<sup>4</sup>. This «neighborhood» of two symbols carrying very different meanings may artistically indicate the ambivalence of the world views shared by many Early Medieval societies. The runic stones were made mostly in the eleventh century when Sweden witnessed intensive confrontation of Christianity promoted by the kings with the local tradition supported by local aristocracy which opposed the centralization processes. «The almost one and a half century long history of the Swedish «Christian» runic stones which were raised in their thousands may be taken as material evidence of the ideological compromise necessary to sustain social order»<sup>5</sup>.

This allows a nuanced interpretation of the famous picture carved on the Danish royal stone in Jelling raised in the late tenth century by the Christian King Harald Bluetooth in memory of his pagan parents. Christ, who is depicted there as a transfiguration of a cross is dramatically entangled in a Scandinavian-type design composed of interlacements<sup>6</sup>. For our discussion, it is interesting that Christ seems to stand among four *triquetras* placed by his feet, which might have symbolized the new order emerging from the old world. Thus, it seems that we are here in the middle of the interreligious dialogue of the turn of the first and the second millennia when specific symbols took ambiguous roles. Apparently, King Harald, who had been raised as pagan and had taken part in numerous raids to the British Isles where he met the insular art, applied

<sup>4</sup> Cf. photos at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funbo\\_Runestones](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funbo_Runestones).

<sup>5</sup> P. Urbańczyk, *Deconstructing the «Nordic civilisation»*, in «Gripla», 20, 2009, pp. 137-162, here p. 155.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jelling\\_stones#/media/File:The\\_Jelling\\_Stone\\_-\\_VIKING\\_exhibition\\_at\\_the\\_National\\_Museum\\_of\\_Denmark\\_-\\_Photo\\_The\\_National\\_Museum\\_of\\_Denmark\\_\(9084035770\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jelling_stones#/media/File:The_Jelling_Stone_-_VIKING_exhibition_at_the_National_Museum_of_Denmark_-_Photo_The_National_Museum_of_Denmark_(9084035770).jpg)



here a premeditated «program» of merging two traditions in order to make this picture comprehensible for both, pagans and Christians.

One of the above-mentioned *triquetras* found in Poland may be placed into a clearly pagan context. This is the triangle-shaped piece of gold found on Ostrów Lednicki (Fig. 4a), which has very good parallels in Scandinavian artefacts which include decorated Thor's hammers<sup>7</sup>. A similar connotation was guessed by the founder of a bronze «capsule» decorated with two knot *triquetras* (Fig. 4b). This artefact excavated in Janów Pomorski where the Scandinavian emporium Truso had been located in the tenth century, was interpreted as «an amulet referring to the Scandinavian mythology»<sup>8</sup>.



Fig. 4a. Fragment of a golden triangle-shaped foil from Ostrów Lednicki



Fig. 4b. Bronze artefact ornamented with a *triquetra* excavated in Truso (Janów Pomorski)

<sup>7</sup> W. Duczko, *Złoty młot boga Thora? O fragmencie skandynawskiej ozdoby z Ostrowa Lednickiego* [A golden Thor's Hammer? On a Fragment of a Scandinavian Decoration from Ostrów Lednicki], in Z. Kurnatowska - A. M. Wyrwa (eds.), *Ostrów Lednicki. Rezydencjonalno-stołeczny ośrodek pierwszych Piastów*, Warszawa, Instytutu Archeologii i Etnologii Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2016, pp. 299-302.

<sup>8</sup> M. F. Jagodziński, *Truso. Between Weonodland and Witland*, Elbląg, Historical Museum of Elbląg, 2010, p. 198.

Yet another face of the interreligious dialogue was the direct confrontation between Christ's cross and Thor's hammer. There are some cases where they are both present. One is a silver Arabic coin found in Russia where both symbols are scratched side by side. Even more impressive is a mold found in Denmark, which served to «opportunistically» cast both, Christian crosses and Thor's hammers – probably depending on the current demand<sup>9</sup>.

In Poland we have numerous artefacts made to demonstrate individual devotion of both, pagans and Christians. These are small crosses and Thor's hammer pendants found at several medieval sites<sup>10</sup>. Among these finds, our attention should be attracted by amber crosses with one of their arms snatched. This made them looking like simple Thor's hammers, which may witness to some opportunistic religious behavior. There is even an amber pendant found in Ostrów Lednicki and shaped to look like both signs, which witnesses to an unusual attempt to merge both symbols (Fig. 5).



Similarly syncretic look some famous Icelandic finds of artefacts, whose producers openly referred to both Christian symbolism and old Scandinavian mythology. The most famous artefacts exhibited at the National Museum of Iceland are: a sitting figure of Thor holding his cross-shaped beard and the so-called «Wolf Cross» found in Foss<sup>11</sup>.

Fig. 5. A cross or a Thor's hammer? An amber pendant found on Ostrów Lednicki Island

<sup>9</sup> Cf. <https://norse-mythology.org/symbols/thors-hammer/thors-hammer-2/>.

<sup>10</sup> For Poland, see J. Jaguś, *Uwagi na temat wymowy magicznej średniowiecznych amuletów i ozdób na ziemiach polskich* [Remarks on the magic meaning of medieval amulets and decorations in Polish lands] in «Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie Skłodowska», 58, 2003, pp. 7-24, here pp. 10-11.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. <https://travelistica.com/en/Activities/Reykjavik/Skip-the-Line%3A-The-National-Museum-of-Iceland-Ticket.a.114097/> and [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Archaeological\\_record\\_of\\_Mj%C3%B6llnir#/media/File:Vargkors\\_kopia.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Archaeological_record_of_Mj%C3%B6llnir#/media/File:Vargkors_kopia.jpg).



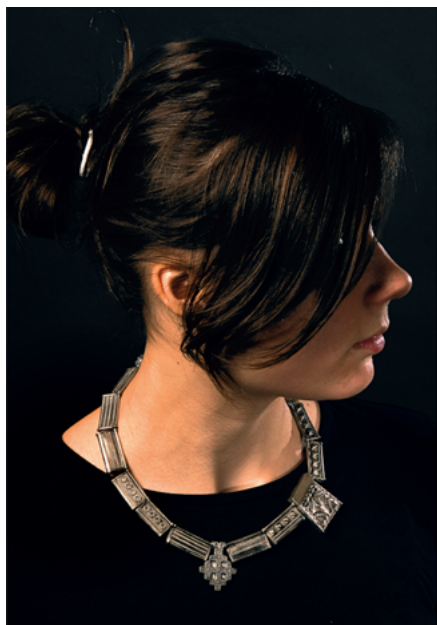


Fig. 6. Reconstruction of the complete necklace found in Dziekanowice

Another creative use of the main Christian symbol is represented by the so-called «Hiddensee» cross-like pendants, four fragments of which have been discovered in four Polish localities. Despite their Christian appearance, they are suspected to have functioned within a pagan or syncretic context<sup>12</sup>. This is convincingly proved by a necklace discovered in 2008 in an eleventh century- grave of a women buried in Dziekanowice, near the above mentioned Ostrów Lednicki Island<sup>13</sup>. This necklace consisted of a silver Hiddensee-type cross pendant and 16 apotropaic box-reliquaries containing various plants meant to protect their owner (Fig. 6).



Fig. 7. A «syncretic» necklace from Daniłowo Małe (photo D. Krasnodębski)

My favorite Polish example of a manifested syncretism is a beautiful necklace found in grave no. 36 in Daniłowo Małe, north-eastern Poland. It consists of an unusual collection of 7 crosses, 3 pagan lunular pendants, and a significant combination of both symbols – all worn together by a twelfth - century woman (Fig. 7).

<sup>12</sup> H. Kóčka-Krenz, *Zoomorficzne ozdoby srebrne z Hedeby (?) na ziemiach polskich* [Zoomorphic silver jewelry from Hedeby(?) in Polish lands], in «Folia Praehistorica Posnaniensia», 6, 1994, pp. 187-199, here p. 196.

<sup>13</sup> S. Kleingarten, *The Cross-Shaped Pendant*, in J. Wrzesiński - A. M. Wyrwa (eds.), *Srebrny naszyjnik z kaptorgami i krzyżowatą zawieszka z Dziekanowic, Lednica, Muzeum Pierwszych Piastów na Lednicy*, pp. 81-97.

Apparently, the owner of this necklace treated both symbols as amulets, which obviously gained in power when multiplied.

The above presented review shows that, despite the over-optimism demonstrated by mediaeval cleric chroniclers who were eager to prove the immediate success of their religion, apparently there was no quick and easy transition from the old beliefs to the Christianity. Various sociotechnical tools must have been employed to ease unavoidable tensions between the two worldviews. Various artefacts illustrated here offer access to just one but very expressive aspect of that struggle, i.e. manipulation with symbols in order to create a specific transitional aesthetics appealing to supporters of both religious systems. This is visible in referring to both symbolic systems or even creating openly syncretic expressions.

Archaeology offers some insight in that difficult time when promotion of the new religion collided with the resistance of masses who were attached to their traditional beliefs.

Creatively referring to specific symbolism was an effective tool applied in pacifying confrontation-related emotions, which could weaken the early Piasts' rule. The destructive power of such a situation was clearly demonstrated in the fourth decade of the eleventh century when it led to the collapse of the centralized Christian state.

We may guess that this early medieval interreligious «dispute» expressed in artistic symbolism applied to various decorations was imported to Polish lands by foreign clerics and missionaries who had the tools for this dialogue brought from other parts of Europe and re-applied in Poland the *imaginarium* well known to them from other fronts of religious confrontation. We do not know whether the locals really understood the problem of challenging symbols. Anyway, it was an extremely difficult task to visually appeal to people who embodied completely different culture of symbols and representations.

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