

Maritime activities of the Western Slavs in the Early Middle Ages

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In the early Middle Ages the Western Slavs occupying the South Baltic Coast from Kiel Bay to the Vistula Estuary played an active part in the social and economic life of the whole of the coastal region. The wide growth of commercial contacts in the Baltic Basin had particular significance, as it was accompanied by numerous armed clashes and contacts, diplomatic or otherwise, between the peoples living there. The premises for these events, as we already know, were the feudalization processes taking place among the Baltic Zone societies, the development of local production and the demand for various luxury goods among powerful Scandinavian, Baltic and Slavonic groups and from time to time from the early states as well. The penetration of foreign merchants – Western Europeans and Arabs searching for goods valued by their own markets – was also significant. This was followed up by the exchange of experiences in the various fields of culture which even led to the formation of certain common characteristics in the maritime regions as a whole.

The Slavonic tribes living in the coastal zone by the very reason of their geographical position participated in the events being played out in the Baltic in the Early Middle Ages. Commercial ties came to the fore. In the 7th and 8th century these still did not have any special significance, being limited, as detailed archaeological analysis has shown, to accidental contacts (Žak 1962). During the second half of the 8th century, however, a fundamental change took place. Recent investigations have made conspicuous advances in solving these problems and they indicate that similar tendencies in economic development were making themselves evident throughout the whole of the Baltic Zone at that time (cf. Herrmann 1982; Lebedev 1985; Łosiński 1988). They were succeeded everywhere in the 9th to 11th centuries by the growth of long distance trade which, depending on the development of local markets in each particular maritime country, only began to lose their significance in the 12th century. The development of crafts was another element of these economic trends. The excavations carried out after the World War II in the more important maritime centres show that, by the 9th century just as in Scandinavia, early urban settlements were being formed, and that by the 10th to the 11th centuries, these settlements had grown considerably in number. Various details, it is true, may still be open to discussion but there can be no doubt whatsoever about the direction of the change itself.

Analysis of archaeological and numismatic sources has proved that for economic reasons the Baltic zone was very closely connected not only with regions situated directly on the sea but also with Polabian interior and the whole of northern Poland including Great Poland and Kujawy, whose main centres were to form in the 9th and 10th centuries the Piast State (Żak 1963-1967, 1988; Leciejewicz 1989, 124-160). In the 10th to the 11th centuries Wolin was the most important Slavonic coastal market place, owing its considerable economy, it seems, to its position on the Oder Estuary and to its mediation in the exchanges between the maritime countries and the territory within the Oder-Warta Basin. At the same time, Wolin and later Szczecin were to become the main points of resistance against Poland and at the beginning of the 12th century against the local princes ruling in Pomerania (Leciejewicz 1962; Filipowiak, Gundlach 1992).

In the light of these facts, there arises the interesting question of the origin of the Gdańsk fortified settlement which, as excavations have shown, was formed on the Vistula Estuary in ca 980 A.D. (Zbierski 1985). Their urbanized conception, the technique applied in their fortification as well as the very date of their foundation supports the hypothesis that Polish princes initiated the founding of Gdańsk so that they could control the Vistula Estuary. In fact, analysis of archaeological findings from that time indicate that the route followed by imported coins shifted over from the Oder Estuary to the Vistula Estuary shortly afterwards. It is worth mentioning here that the mission of the St. Adalbert in 997 can also be interpreted as a Polish attempt to penetrate the eastern banks of the Vistula Estuary. This being the case, we are confronted by the intentional policies of Polish princes aspiring to ensure for themselves an outlet into the Baltic.

Certain controversial problems concerning the character of the political contacts between the communities living on the Baltic have been considered during the course of the latest investigations. The question, which was hotly disputed in the interwar period, concerning the part played by the Scandinavians in Slavonic history dominated research after 1945. G. Labuda, after a detailed analysis of Scandinavian sources, states that the conception of the existence of a Viking settlement at Jomsborg at the end of 10th century, localized according to the fairly unanimous opinion of the experts in Wolin, is unfounded (Labuda 1964, 107-220; cfr. Leciejewicz 1993). Wolin, just like any other emporium of international trade, was inhabited by various ethnic groups. This has been illustrated both by the written sources and by certain archaeological facts. As 10th and 11th century sources show, particularly the accounts of Adam of Bremen, Slavonic merchants formed the social group which had the decisive voice. Archaeological investigations carried out at other places in the coastal zone indicate, without any doubt, that the presence of persons of Scandinavian descent cannot be excluded, but this fact did not greatly influence the direction of the cultural development of the local peoples.

It was mainly local magnates who exercised active maritime politics on the southern coast of the Baltic and engaged in trade and who were concentrated in the newly forming early urban settlements (Leciejewicz 1962, 260-281; Zernack 1967, 208-243). This led, as we know, to the development of a specific type – from the point of view of its constitution – of “urban republic” on the Oder Estuary (Szczecin, Wolin, etc.). The Polish penetration in the 10th century was the first signal of interest from the early state in this region. The early feudal princes, both

Polish and local, had standardized most of the political sea contacts by the 12th century. Generally speaking, it is possible to state here, that the Scandinavian and, to a certain extent, the Baltic and Slavonic communities at that time had much in common as regards the premises behind their seafaring.

Under such conditions as these the inhabitants of the southern Baltic littoral exploited the sea. Here, it is worth emphasizing that, just as in Scandinavia and other north-west European countries, it is difficult to mark the exact boundaries between the sea sailing and inland water sailing. This can only be shown by the construction of the vessel itself, for a relatively shallow draught would allow it to travel a distance of several km. up the smaller rivers and much further up the bigger waterways such as the Oder and Vistula (Smolarek 1969; Ellmers 1972).

During the course of recent investigations the question arose as to whether the early mediaeval Slavs repeated earlier traditions which date back to the pre-historic period. However, it is difficult to trace traditions accurately because of the weakness of the source evidence. Mediaeval data for Slavonic maritime proficiency were, until quite recently, limited to only fairly generalized information from written sources of the 10th to the 13th centuries. Only the ship depicted on the door of Gniezno Cathedral from the second half of the 12th century and several wrecks discovered at the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century give a certain ideal of how these vessels were constructed.

At present, as far as familiarity with Slavonic vessels is concerned, we have at our disposal somewhat wider source material gained during the course of systematic archaeological investigation (Herrmann 1985, 148-150; Filipowiak 1989). Among this material is a practically complete boat from the 9th century, discovered under settlement layers in Szczecin as well as four wrecks from Ralswiek on Rügen. In settlement layers in Szczecin, Wolin, Kołobrzeg and Gdańsk various parts of vessels have been found, as have here and there incomplete parts from the 9th to the 13th centuries which had been put to a secondary use in road building and dwelling construction. It is also worth mentioning that among the children's toys of those times we find imaginary miniature boats and ships. These permit interesting reconstruction of many unknown details.

The question about the period when the Slavs made use of dugout canoes for coastal navigation is a debatable one. On the other hand, there can be no doubt at all that larger vessels of plank construction were used for longer expeditions. Technical analysis of the recovered wrecks has shown that this type of navigation unit was entirely suitable for open sea sailing. The vessels from Gdańsk-Orunia were 11-14 m. in length, 2-4 m. wide, while the measurement of the midship amounted to approx. 0,8 m. The vessel to be discovered in Szczecin is not much smaller, being 7 m. in length and 2 m. wide. The vessels from Ralswiek were 13-14 m. in length, approx. 3,4 m. wide and approx. 9,5 m. in length, 2,5 m. wide. They were constructed from planks scarved together lengthwise and strengthened by an internal framework. Specific parts were attached by wooden trenails or iron nails clinched over square roves and the fissures were packed with moss or tow mixed with tar. The image of these vessels on the door of Gniezno Cathedral illustrates that there was frequently a decorative animal's head sculpted on the prow according to the Scandinavian pattern.

From a functional point of view, it is possible to segregate the fishing boat intended for a crew of several men, worked by oar and eventually by sail, from

the other vessels then in use. The many-oared vessels employed for war expeditions were somewhat larger in size. In all probability, the two vessels found in Gdańsk-Orunia with a loading capacity estimated at 2 700-2 900 kg were used for this purpose. The war vessel put at St. Adalbert's disposal by the Polish duke accommodated, according to written sources, 30 warriors and 3 missionaries. In the light of Snorre Sturlason's account of the expedition to Konghelle in 1136 by Racibor, prince of Pomerania, the vessels that were used for war expeditions sometimes accommodated as many as 44 warriors and two horses, which would put their loading capacity at about 5 000 kg. In fact, some of the units we are already familiar with had an estimated loading capacity of about 4-5 metric tons. At present, we are concerned in particular with cargo vessels, used for trading purposes and mainly worked by oar. Miniature images found in Gdańsk settlement layers suggest that by the beginning of the 12th century at least, broad vessels with sharp bow endings were being used as ferries. We have direct confirmation of the existence of ferries in Gdańsk Pomerania only from the thirteenth century.

On the other hand, the question of when the merchant freighter with the stern rudder - the cog made its first appearance is still under discussion. The vessel on the door at Gniezno has been described at times as "the Baltic cog", but, as A. Zbierski (1964, 132-137) has justifiably pointed out, this vessel is much more reminiscent of an eleventh-century Norman vessel (Bayeux Tapestry) and moreover, both of them have an identical function. In the opinion of this same investigator, certain structures of the port of Gdańsk at the end of the 12th century, such as the great stakes used for mooring large units, would suggest that, after all, the cog could have appeared on the Pomeranian coast before the end of the 12th century. All the finds have been dated in an albeit fairly generalized way, and therefore caution is indicated. The well-known document of Prince Świętopełk of Gdańsk, which gives the first indubitable evidence of the cog, dates from the period 1220-1227, and so these years must remain as our *terminus ante quem*.

In the light of these observations, there can be no doubt at all that the Slavonic inhabitants of the coast were using all the basic kinds of vessels then in use in the Baltic Region. The detailed investigations of P. Smolarek suggest a characteristic dissimilarity in construction, which indicates that the Slavonic ship-builders, frequently irrespective of the Scandinavians, made use of their own sailing experience (Smolarek 1968; see also Hensel 1987, 256-260). The comparatively small amount of finds inclines us to caution, but certain of the individual constructions suggest that it may be possible to differentiate the specific characteristic of Slavonic ship-building workshops. It is quite certain that such workshops did exist, although their traces are not easily grasped by the archaeologists. The only discovery of this kind has been in Wolin where the base of a capstan for beaching boats (which dates from the second half of the 9th century) with some fragments of planks lying beside it were uncovered. These permit us to suppose that vessels had once built been in the place, where they were recovered. The first information about such workshops does not come before 1220-1227 and only concerns Gdańsk. It is justifiably stressed, bearing in mind ethnological analogies from the not very far distant past, that most coastal settlements vessels and fishing vessels in particular could well have been constructed by the users themselves.

The matter of maritime ports and harbours is another key problem concerning the sea activities of the Western Slavs. Detailed investigations indicate that about a hundred centres of this kind can be recognized along the southern, Slav-inhabited Baltic coast (Zbierski 1968; Filipowiak 1989). It is certain, in general, that all maritime settlements had some kind of harbour with, at times, very primitive facilities for mooring vessels and even with wooden landing stages as well. In the light of archaeological observations it may be recalled that the Slavs on the Baltic coast were true masters in the art of maritime construction. Unfortunately, not one of these smaller harbours has yet been examined in a systematic way. In the 13th century, places of this kind were either situated in bays near the estuaries of smaller rivers, or else on the banks of off-shore lakes, which often were used as exit bases for open-sea fishing.

On the other hand, port centres with a wider international significance have been reasonably successfully identified. In particular this has been due to the terrain research carried out in all the more important maritime towns. Apart from the analysis of the natural landscape and its relationship to the settlement, excavations have been carried out in many places, sited directly on top of former ports (Gdańsk, Wolin, Ralswiek). In this way it was possible to fix the chronology of the use of the port facilities, to reconstruct their internal structure (equipment) and the relation of individual elements to each other and to define their functions in the frame of the urban setting.

From their geographical characteristics, the Slavonic ports show that they had many features in common with the other facilities of this type in the Baltic region. For example, as was the case with Scandinavian settlements, they were sited a little further back away from the open sea. This was a security measure and, as it has been frequently pointed out, it protected them from unexpected attacks from the sea. Before selecting a place suitable for a harbour, care was taken to take full advantage of the natural landscape - a bay, somewhat sheltered from the main stream of the river and generally situated just below the main river crossing. The urban complex, including its artisan and mercantile centres, was built on the far side of the port, to which it was joined. Proximity to the fortified part of the town, which in certain of the settlements was the seat of the ruling prince gave a further guarantee of safety. Analysis of settlements has indicated that, apart from harbours for merchant ships, warships and larger fishing vessels, there were also various smaller facilities, which may have stretched all along the coast in the neighbourhood of buildings. This mainly concerned fishing harbours which served the poorer inhabitants of the suburbs.

Archaeological research shows that basically the port facilities were erected in the period when the settlement started to assume early urban characteristics. On more than one occasion, archaeologists have been tempted to try and reconstruct the various coastal infrastructure of that time. Apart from the excavation work, in places advantage could be taken of the research carried out by under-water divers. The investigations of W. Filipowiak in Wolin confirm the findings of numerous stakes used for mooring purposes and foundations of landing stages, dated from the 9th to the 13th centuries (Filipowiak 1989; Filipowiak, Gundlach 1992, 76-80). In this context it is worth recalling that certain information provided by Ibrahim ibn Jakub in 965/966 probably concerned the port of Wolin: "it [i. e. the town of the twelve gates] has a harbour for which bisected

stumps were used". This undoubtedly refers to the wooden surface of the landing stages. The systematic research of A. Zbierski in Gdańsk also brought in enormously valuable information (Zbierski 1964). Various elements of wooden harbour constructions from the 10th to the 13th centuries were uncovered here - stakes used for moorings, coastal consolidation and fragments of landing stages. According to relative figures, by the end of the 10th century to Gdańsk, a 350 m. section of coastal harbour was erected and by the 12th and 13th centuries this section had been extended to about 650 m. Unfortunately, all attempts to localize light houses (their existence can be gathered on the basis of analogy and from confused source accounts), both in Wolin and in Gdańsk have failed. At Ralswiek a little more simple harbour facilities of 9th century were uncovered (Herrmann 1984). Closer information about customs buildings, the taverns connected with them and store houses, mentioned in the 12th to 13th centuries has not been forthcoming.

The development of port facilities in the afore-mentioned points was, as we have stressed, derived from the political and economic significance of the maritime town. There can be no great doubt, that these towns provided the main access to the sea, both for the inhabitants of the coastal regions and the early states which were taking control of them. The organization of early navies also deserves some consideration, for it was very closely tied up with the organization of economic and political life.

The question of maritime trade exchanges and war expeditions naturally arises. As regards the early Middle Ages, however, it is difficult to separate these two fields precisely. It must be admitted that, in general, owing to the poverty of the sources, research into sailing of this kind has gone no further than the armed battles on the Baltic between the 10th and 13th centuries (Ślaski 1969). But it is worth mentioning here that we have direct information of Slavs reaching the market place at Birka and the nearby Baltic islands for trading purposes. In towns on the Oder Estuary, even up to the beginning of the 12th century the local duke had a smallish flotilla at his disposal, as was the case with Wyszak, an inhabitant of Szczecin, who "*copioso 6 navium apparatus Danos sibi infensos petebat*". It is true that it is not clear whether he was owner of those ships or whether the commander was. Another example from the same period is provided by Nedamir, who lived in Wolin and, according to Otto of Bamberg's biographer, had at his disposal "*tres naves non modicas victualium copia oneratas*". In general, it was this same social group which controlled the Obrodite and Rügen warrior bands which plundered the Danish coast in the first half of the 12th century until the fall of Arkona in 1168. A further example of the varied information is Ebo's account of the Gützkow noble, Mislaw, which illustrates that other nobles from inland settlements took part in these expeditions as well. These centres directly connected to the sea by water-ways also possessed flotillas, as was the case with Gützkow situated on the Peene River. Therefore, there were many characteristics here similar to the relations prevailing in Scandinavian countries in the 9th to the 11th centuries.

The growth of the early states in the Baltic region led to the various branches of sailing being taken under their control. As we have already mentioned, it is possible that Gdańsk owes its importance in the second half of the 10th century to the deliberate policies of the first Piasts. It is not entirely clear how mer-

cantile expeditions were organized under these conditions, but we have information about foreign ships that forced their way along the Rügen and Pomeranian coast in the 12th-13th centuries. All the customs payments collected in the ports were taken over by the princely treasury; foreign ships were obliged to buy their provisions in the princely taverns, while the state authorities, in accord with the obligatory law of the coast, captured the property of ships wrecked off the Slavonic coast (cfr. Matysik 1950).

On the other hand, the Polish authorities and the local Pomeranians organized the sea defences. The first mention of this, as may be recalled, is in the account of the life of St. Adalbert, which speaks about the vessel or vessels put at the missionary's disposal by the Polish prince. We can gain fuller information from the growth of the sea battles on the Baltic in the first half of the 12th century in which the Obodrite, Rügen and Pomeranian princes, among others, participated. In his account of the destruction of Konghelle, Snorre Sturlason relates, probably on the basis of eye-witness information, that prince Racibor's flotilla in 1136 consisted of 300 vessels. In 1184 Prince Bogusław's flotilla, according to source accounts, amounted to about 500 ships (Ślaski 1969, 94-132). These are quite considerable figures, but information on this subject shows that they do not greatly deviate from the figures given for other Slavonic and Scandinavian flotillas at that time.

Interesting information was gained from research into other forms of seafaring among coastal societies. We have now come to fishing, which, in agreement with written, archaeological and topographic information, was practiced by most of the coastal inhabitants throughout the whole of the early Middle Ages (Rulewicz 1994). Herring catches were the most important followed by cod, sturgeon and sometimes salmon and other fish. Written sources testify that herring was widely fished in the Baltic, especially on the coast of Rügen, in the second half of the 12th and the first half of the 13th century. Accounts from that time indicate that suitably conserved fish was often exported far into the hinterland. In the light of archaeological evidence Kołobrzeg was an important herring market in the 9th to the 12th centuries (Leciejewicz 1991).

As archaeological research shows, most of the inhabitants of the fortified quarters of the coastal towns were engaged in fishing. They were a relatively well-off group of people, close to artisan in standing and perhaps at times, they even worked as craftsmen. Excavations begun in Gdańsk cast an interesting light on the organization of fishing hauls in the 12th to the 13th centuries. It seems, judging by some of the finds, that certain of the buoys, used in fishing with great nets, would have required several fishermen working in co-operation to operate them. Some of these buoys were marked with a sign of ownership, and these signs recur in several consecutive layers in adjoining huts. This would indicate that the fishing-trade was passed down from father to son by the inhabitants of these dwellings, and that certain kinds of fishing partnerships existed, perhaps similar to the "maszoperia" which was still functioning on the Pomeranian coast until not so very long ago. Unfortunately, at present, we are not able to establish whether similar forms of organization were known to the fishermen of other centres.

Contacts prevalent in the West Baltic Region in the second half of the 12th century would indicate that for the most part, the organization of the hauls lay in

the hands of wealthy, sometimes foreign merchants. The consolidation of the state led to the introduction of rules of *ius ducale* in this field. Local dukes exacted levies, service and obedience through the intermediary of selected officials. These rights, moderated by the granting of immunities, were gradually handed over to the feudal landowners and especially to the Church.

Our review of current research clearly shows the significance of maritime questions for early medieval Baltic studies. We have at our disposal convincing information which indicates that Slavonic sea activity was simply a functional consequence of the economic and social development of the Slavs. Their contacts with the Scandinavians and Balts were close and led to mutual exchanges of experiences. However, it was not these exchanges that determined the character of West Slavonic ties with the sea. The Baltic was, in the early Middle Ages, a great communication lane connecting the communities living there with each other and, by the North Sea to the West, by the river routes of the Dnieper and Volga to the East and, to a lesser extent, by the Vistula and Oder to the South, with distant peoples and civilizations. Here lay the interest of the newly-forming European states in the sea. This interest, by the very nature of things was more intense in coastal areas than farther back into the hinterland of the country. Thus sailing ability and maritime activities became an integral part of the cultural achievements of this section of Western Slavs who were living on the Baltic coast and gave them their own characteristic mark on many fields of their life. It goes without saying that all these matters should be examined in the general Baltic context.

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Vakarų slavų jūrinis aktyvumas ankstyvaisiais viduramžiais

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Santrauka

Vakarų slavai ankstyvaisiais viduramžiais buvo apgyvendinę pietines Baltijos jūros pakrantes nuo Kilio įlankos iki Vyslos žiočių ir vaidino svarbų vaidmenį socialiniame ir ekonominiame visos pakrantės gyvenime. Prekybinių kontaktų plėtimasis Baltijos baseine buvo lydimas skaitlingų ginkluotų susirėmimų, užsienio kraštų pirklių iš Vakarų Europos ir Arabų pasaulio skverbimosi ieškant rinkos savo prekėms. Slavų gentys dėl savo patogios geografinės padėties irgi aktyviai dalyvavo visuose regiono įvykiuose.

Prekybiniai ryšiai pradėjo vaidinti vis svarbesnį vaidmenį. Jeigu VII-VIII a. jie dar neturėjo ypatingos svarbos, buvo apriboti iš dalies atsitiktinių kontaktų, tai VIII a. antroje pusėje įvyksta kardinalūs pasikeitimai: išauga vietinė rinka, vystosi amatai ir tolimoji prekyba. Kaip mini X-XI a. rašytiniai šaltiniai ir iš dalies teigia Adomas Bremenietis, slavų pirkliai suformuoja stiprų socialinį sluoksnį, kuris lemia prekybos intensyvumą.

Vakarų slavų aktyvumą jūroje rodo prieplaukų bei uostų gausa pakrantėse. Archeologiniai šaltiniai rodo, kad uostai dažniausiai buvo įrengiami tada, kai gy-

venvietės pradėjo įgauti ankstyvųjų miestų bruožų. Jų raida buvo tiesiogiai susijusi su miesto politine ir ekonomine svarba. Uostus įrengdavo nedidelių upių žiotyse arba įlankose, patogiose išplaukti į atvirą jūrą. Vakarų slavų apgyventose pietinėse Baltijos jūros pakrantėse dabar žinoma apie 100 ankstyvųjų viduramžių uostų vietų. Tačiau nei viena iš smulkesnių prieplaukų nebuvo sistemingai tyrinėta. Tik iš geografinės padėties galima spręsti, kad slavų uostai ir prieplaukos turėjo bendrą bruožą, būdingą visam Baltijos jūros regionui.

Tyrinėjimai rodo, kad slavų jūrinis aktyvumas ankstyvaisiais viduramžiais buvo ekonominės ir socialinės raidos pasekmė. Jų ryšiai su skandinavais ir baltais buvo glaudūs ir leido abipusiai keistis patyrimu. Tačiau šie santykiai neribojo vakarų slavų ryšių su jūra. Baltijos jūra tuo metu buvo ta gija, kuri siejo bendruomenes gyvenančias pietinėse pakrantėse su Šiaurės jūra vakaruose, Dniepro ir Volgos upėmis rytuose, Vysla ir Oderiu pietuose, su kitais tolimais kraštais ir civilizacijomis. Baltijos jūroje glūdi naujai besiformuojančių Europos valstybių interesai. Tie interesai, labai natūralu, stipriau reiškesi pakrantės zonoje nei atokesnėse teritorijose giliau žemyne. Taigi plaukiojimo galimybė ir jūrinis aktyvumas tapo neatskiriama dalimi vakarų slavų kultūrinių pasiekimų ir suteikė jiems savitą gyvenimo būdo bruožą. Reikia pasakyti, kad tai turi būti tyrinėjama visame Baltijos jūros regiono kontekste.