

Piotr N. Kotowicz

Early Medieval Axes from Territory of Poland

(Summary)

The main aim of this dissertation was the comprehensive analysis of early medieval axes dated to the period from the 6th to the end of the 1st half of the 13th century which come from the territory of present-day Poland. It was based mostly on the set of 891 artefacts (mainly axe heads) found during archaeological excavations and being accidentally discoveries. Their analysis was supplemented by the interpretation of few historical and iconographical sources.

In the beginning, the technology of axe heads based on metallographic examinations was discussed in detail as well as the techniques of decoration used in some of them.

The most important element of research process was the entire typo-chronological analysis of 719 axe heads, which were classified by the new – according to the proposition of the author – universal typology. It resulted in the distinction of thirteen basic types divided on several dozen varieties and variants.

Some remarks were devoted to the wooden hafts. They included many problems, such as material preferences of their makers, shaping of wood, giving the proper length or the adornment of the chosen specimens.

In next step, the joining devices of axe heads with hafts were discussed. Here, the metal (wedges, nails or fittings) as well as leather additional elements for stabilisation of the whole construction were in use. There was little space left to the issues of preservation of the axes, i.e. the possible usage of the leather or textile covers in Early Medieval Ages.

One of the most important questions given in this monograph was the problem of the function of the analysed axes. The numerous early medieval historical and iconographical sources from the whole of Europe show the axes both as a weapon and as a tool. Unfortunately, on this basis only in few cases (i.e. hammer axes or carpenter's axes) the function of axe heads' groups could have been distinguished in a convincing way. Therefore, as a background element differentiating a weapon from a tool was the weight of the axe heads acknowledged: lower (under 500 g) for the specimens approved as fighting axes and upper for the artefacts for everyday purposes. Certainly, this line is convectional – based on the weight

of the axe heads discovered in graves (mostly weaponry) – and in both groups could be found the numerous specimens of universal function.

Except the utilitarian destiny, the axe served the important function as a social status indicant and as an element of magical-ceremonial religious practices. The first function is mostly characterised by the specimens discovered in burials and the artefacts with ornamentation – especially made in the inlay technique. The axe had a strong position in the bygone beliefs – both pagan and Christian. Probably with this matter, the bronze or silver miniature axes used as amulets were linked. Perhaps some watery finds (eg. certain artefacts from the Lednica Lake) could be connected with sacrifices of the axes for the pre-Christian divinities. On the other hand, the axe heads' finds adorned with the sign of the cross could be associated with the Christian religion.

The final consideration was given to the role of the axe in the life of communities living in the early medieval Polish lands. It was noted that the axes were almost absent in the oldest phase of the early Middle Ages – the so-called Early Slav period (the 6th – ca. half of the 7th century) , which, however, is generally associated with poor cultural model of the first Slavs. The situation improved significantly in the 9th century, as a result of establishing the strong contacts of tribes from southern Poland with the Moravian Slavs. Most of artefacts from this period were imports from the South. A turning point was the rise of the Polish state in the 2nd half of the 10th century, which by leading an intense, external politics – also in the military aspect – was forced to start the production of the weapon and tools on a larger scale. From the period between the 2nd half of the 10th and 1st half of the 12th century the majority of finds can be noticed, among them there is a large group of northern and eastern European imports, or specimens which were modelled on them. The situation changed in the period of feudal fragmentation of Poland, lasting until the decline of the Early Medieval Ages (from ca. half of the 12th to the mid of the 13th century), when the axe lost its importance as a weapon of a new social group – the chivalry. The role of the axes in the Western Baltic tribes – Prussians and Yotvingians – which lived in the Middle Ages in the north-eastern part of the present-day Poland, was also elaborated. In contrast to their eastern kinsmen (Lithuanians and Latvians), the axe had the marginal importance among the Western Balts, and was documented by only a few known specimens. It is worth mentioning that from the end of the 10th century in the eastern frontiers of today's Poland the border between the young countries of Polish Piasts and Rus Ruriks began to form. At the end of the 11th century, it extended slightly on the west of the present-day border line of the Poland. From this region a significant number of axes heads came, which shows that both in Poland and in the Western Ruthenian duchies, an axe

played an important role as a weapon and as a tool. The majority of these findings can be associated with the eastern Europe. In contradiction to Polish territory, an axe had a great meaning there in the 12th and the 13th century.