

Social bonds in early medieval Poland

Civilized Slavs



Professor Samsonowicz
reconstructs
a picture
of what interpersonal
bonds looked like
in medieval society

HENRYK SAMSONOWICZ

Polish Academy of Sciences
wydzial1@pan.pl

In the 9th-11th centuries, Poland was characterized by a process whereby Slavic society was adapted into a civilization founded on Mediterranean culture, resulting in the emergence of a new, open society. Two kinds of social bonds came to coexist: on the one hand there were tribal community bonds founded mainly on territorial and family unity, while on the other there were new bonds based upon the institutions of the state

Social bonds, which identify an individual's place in the world, give the individual a sense of security and make him or her feel comfortable, are subject to change over time. The role played by such bonds in social life is a function of varying economic, systemic, and cultural relations. It is natural that people belonged, and continue to belong, to various "community" groups: the categories of family, peer group, and units of territorial, national, state, and religious unity are for each individual organized into a recognized hierarchy of importance, which varies over time and by place. As new living conditions appear, new forms of interpersonal bonds – of a professional, legal, religious, or ideological nature – emerge, perhaps slowly or perhaps rapidly, and the existing relations between them undergo change. Some types lose significance, while others gain, and new kinds of bonds emerge in tandem with ongoing social, economic, or ideological transformations.

Language and family

When considering the interpersonal relations that were present in Poland in the 9th-11th centuries, we can preliminarily adopt the following assumptions for this pe-

riod of nascent Polish statehood. We should identify language, territory, and family ties as having been instrumental factors that characterized communities. Strong bonds were certainly generated by membership in a tribe, as well as perhaps by a commonality of faith and customs, the latter construed as a system of law. Certain questions that remain open pertain to people's "memory" of their own past, a bond that links people of varying social statuses, as well as to the existence (or absence) of an affluent class. Another issue to be addressed is who it was that had a hand in wielding authority, something that changed as state organization was being developed, and by the same token as new political elites emerged.

We can surmise that one of the most important factors cementing early communities together was language. A significant portion of the tribal names preserved in the sources are self-referential appellations, comprehensible to members of the given community. The term "Slav," tied to the common Slavic root *slovo*, or "word," signified people who shared a common word, meaning a common speech – a name that attests to this ethnic group's self-identification. Naming is one of the most important acts involved in creating an identity, not only for individuals, but for groups of people as well. This name divided the world up into two parts, one part inhabited by those in possession of speech, the other by people who were "mute" (the word for "German" in Polish and other Slavic languages, *niemiec*, being tied to the root *niemy*, or "mute").

The "Slavic community" was surely the highest-order framework with which people identified. At the other end of this scale stood the family, constituting a kind of fundamental social particle, a "quark" or building-block of larger communities. Did families possess their own names, and if so, starting when? Sometimes, a set of descendants bore an eponymic name, as is illustrated by the names of certain tribes that are derived

from the patriarch of a clan. However, there is another poignant trace of the clan's significance in ancient Slavic social structures, visible all the way until the early modern epoch: an extensive system of kinship terms, which very precisely identify the bonds between members of a large family, encompassing at least four generations.

Where do you come from?

At an early stage in the appearance of written sources, individuals are identified by means of the lands where they lived, or, somewhat later, by the localities they inhabited. A sense of having territorial bonds and of being tied to one's place of birth or property seems to have been, even until the 17th century, a very strong factor in fusing human communities together – and, particularly importantly, a means of identifying individuals. We do not know when this state of affairs arose, but we can assert that in times for which more voluminous sources exist, most individuals appearing in court are indeed identified by their place of origin.

It is not out of the question that such geographically-based identification of individuals may have stretched back to tribal times. The oldest written sources provide information about the proper names of smaller territorial units. Hamlets and towns also had their own proper names, originating from various sources: personal names, topographical characteristics, or type of vegetation. People's sense of belonging to such a place can be noted quite well in somewhat later times, just like the sense of belonging to a town community, reinforced by common duties performed for the state authorities.

It is hard to say whether the sense of local ties was stronger than the sense of belonging to a wider community – be it a tribal or general community. If we could ask a 10th-century inhabitant of today's Polish lands where he was from, we do not know if he would respond that he was a "Masovian" (from the region of Mazowsze), for example, or whether he would say that he came from this or that particular locality. It seems, again based on later materials, that belonging to



Birds-eye view of the remnants of a stronghold in Stara Łomża in the Mazowsze region. This fortified town was established at the turn of the 10th and 11th centuries, and was a center of early Piast castellany authority

Jędrzej Mielnik

Social bonds in early medieval Poland

a “small-scale homeland” (perhaps even on the smallest scale) was of great significance in the awareness of people in those days. In other words, it seems that a person would present himself or herself as an inhabitant of a settlement that lent its name to the surrounding vicinity.

Remembering the past

It is well known that the existence of a community is also determined by its self-awareness. “*Magna vis est memoria*,” wrote St. Augustine, and regardless of such factors as language, inhabited territory, forms of professional activity, or uniform forms of social communication, until a community finds a way to explain its own identity, it will remain weak and primitive. This might chiefly involve common beliefs concerning the community’s own origins, very general views about the nature of the universe, etc. There can be no nation without a history, nor can there be a nation without religious unity. Clans and families, at least during the times we know more about, were also aware of their own pasts, as reflected in their knowledge of the names of their ancestors. The dynastic line, especially significant during the period of nascent state organization, became the fabric for Slavic communities’ memory of a common past. The theme whereby the ruling dynasty’s origins stretch back to a farmer ancestor is evident in both the Czech and Polish traditions – the chronicler Gallus Anonimus relates the legend of the poor ploughman Piast who founded a dynastic line.

For the lands that comprised the future Piast state, there was perhaps one other important factor that bound communities together: religious beliefs. The 10th century saw Christianity adopted in eastern and southern Europe. There is no doubt that followers of this religion felt a close-knit commonality with their fellow Christians, including those with a different language or different customs. Nevertheless, their numbers were probably small enough that their religious bond began to play a larger role only in the second half of the 10th century.

Prior to their acceptance of Christianity, Slavs had adhered to religious beliefs that generated a commonality of ceremony, ritual, and comprehensible gestures, focused around sacred sites. After the adoption of Christianity, of course, ecclesiastical organization became a factor that helped to fuse new state entities. This also entailed a difference with respect to beliefs from pagan times, since religion no longer served as a kind of calling-card or identifier for local political communities – it served firstly to draw people together into a universal community, and secondly to bolster the institution of the state.

Building the state

There is no doubt that the emergence of state organizations led to the creation of new group bonds, and effected changes in the previous hierarchy of importance. We can only surmise how this must have taken place in tribal times. Drawing upon analogies, including non-European ones, and judging by very obscure references that have been preserved in tradition and in chroniclers’ accounts, we can conclude that very industrious individuals always served as a focal point for groups of people whose social standing was derived from their proximity to such authority. In our Polish lands, however, such authority does not, until as late as the 10th century, seem to have been overly strong, or to have eclipsed the previously extant mechanisms of social organization that functioned within the tribe. The emergence of the state changed this state of affairs.

It does not seem, however, that the beneficiaries of the old order had an interest in seeing social and political change take



National Museum in Warsaw

Project of a *panneau*
by Zofia Stryjeńska
for the World Expo
in Paris in 1925.
Stylized genre scenes
from Slavic life were
a fashionable element
in 1920s artwork



Foundation of the Czartoryski Princes

King Herod in a miniature from the 11th-century Płock Gospel portrays the essence of the medieval ruler, surrounded by warriors in costumes from the period

place. The results of archeological research over the past two decades appear to evidence two important phenomena occurring in the Polish lands in the 9th-10th centuries. The change of system took place rapidly, one might say violently, and it was carried out not by means of negotiations, but rather by force. Old strongholds from pre-state times were burnt down, new centers were built, and changes are evident in the settlement network – all of these findings discovered during excavation work attest to the violence and profoundness of the changes that took place. The destruction of the old centers, naturally, entailed a loss of importance not only for the localities themselves, but also for the people who resided in them.

Medieval elites

And so, powerful new elites most probably emerged. Their origins are not clear. Studies of graveyards indicate that differences appear in the 10th century in terms of grave goods, the positioning of remains, and richer burials. To portray things in a simplified way, we might say that the local elites consisted of “rich foreigners,” although there may have been locals as well. Their significance was based on the role they played in establishing the new order, on their proximity to the center of authority – the chieftain or prince. (The significance of the latter was emphasized by contemporary chroniclers by referring to him as “king”.) The emergence of the state wrought changes in the hierarchy of authority, and undoubtedly in the hierarchy of wealth as well. State organization had to be based on an executive authority

that was significantly more effective than the previous, tribal authority; it had to be capable of extracting levies and enforcing the performance of duties. By the same token, the apparatus of authority, consisting of people dependent upon the prince, had to be expanded. Building such an apparatus required not just effective organization and the power to impose a new order, it also required that sufficient funds be collected to maintain the necessary armed force or squad. The state in those days, operating as a self-financing investment, generated income by carrying out armed operations with the aim of winning tributes, loot, and slaves. Members of such squads were paid by the prince, and the generosity they received was up to the ruler’s discretion. As long as the state functioned effectively, the prince’s adjutants could expect to receive a greater portion of the accumulated wealth and to obtain various privileges (such as dowries for their daughters).

Old bonds, new bonds

However, this does not mean that the bonds that arose within the new state organization replaced the previously extant bonds founded on kinship, proximity of residence, or tribal unity (not to mention the significance of a common language). Here we should point out that in tandem with the emergence of states, the social hierarchy also underwent change. Alongside the traditional social hierarchy based on the significance of the one’s clan or position within the tribal hierarchy or territorial community, which certainly played a significant role,

Social bonds in early medieval Poland

Katarzyna Lisowska



This plaiting from the Dominican Church in Sandomierz comes from the late medieval period (13th century), although as a decorative element it appeared significantly earlier

a new social ladder of dependency appeared. Members of the armed force, economic administration, and all those who had close and easy access to the ruler occupied the higher rungs. On lower rungs, there appeared a social group that consisted of various categories of bondsmen and servants employed to perform various state functions: guard duty, transportation, communications, etc. Great importance was ascribed to highly-qualified, imported specialists (at least at an early stage of the nascent state), such as coiners, architects, and clerks.

There is no doubt that the significance of state posts (offices) increased after central authority was reestablished in the mid-11th century. Perhaps only later did the dividing lines between the “provinces” (later “*districtus*”?) and town areas arise within the new monarchy. Research into the history of Masovia indicate that the original location of this tribal territory was, in simplified terms, between the right bank of the Vistula River and the right bank of the Narwa River. The “*comes*” of Masovia appeared at the turn of the 11th and 12th centuries. The second monarchy already had provinces, Silesia and Masovia, and perhaps others, centered on Kraków and Poznań, as well as court officials known by their names (or sometimes by their manors), led by the voivode (*comes platinus*) and territorial officials. Larger, the more important strongholds performed the function of centers of military, economic, and perhaps judicial administration.

A characteristic trait of society in the lands on the Vistula River during later times was mobility – the preservation, all the way to the 15th century, of individuals’ ability to move from one legal, professional or territorial (from village to town, to another province, another country) group to another. What made such social mobility possible, such movement from group to group? There were probably two paths that led to a change in social status, sometimes closely linked to one another – attaining wealth and (or) attaining power. The rapidity of the changes, the movement of various groups within the hierarchy can probably be explained by Slavic society’s incorporation into the domain of civilization, with significantly more stable structures created and based on the achievements of Mediterranean culture. In the Polish lands, the adaptive processes leading to this resulted in the emergence of a new open society that forged social bonds of particular types: on the one hand, old social bonds derived from various time periods were maintained, while on the other, new bonds introduced by Christianity and the political system of more advanced states were adapted and modified in line with local conditions. ■

Further reading:

- Lowmiański H. (1963-75). *Początki Polski*, vol. I-VI. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.
- Samsonowicz H. (1996). *Struktura społeczna późnego średniowiecza Polski w badaniach historycznych*. Vol VII. In: Kuczyński S. K. (Ed). *Spółeczeństwo Polski średniowiecznej* (267-282). Warszawa: DiG.