

THE SWORD FOUND AT OSIECZNA
IN GREAT POLAND

BY

MARIAN GŁOSEK and LESZEK KAJZER

FEW specimens of Polish swords were studied in separate papers. An exception is the Polish kings' coronation sword called «Szczerbiec», which has abundant literature and still absorbs the scholars¹. This sword was first used during Wladislaw Lokietek's coronation in 1320 and from this time on it was permanently connected with the coronation ceremonies of the Polish kings. Presently, it is one of the most precious monuments kept at Cracow in the Wawel Castle Royal Treasury which was greatly impoverished by war disturbances and numerous plunders. In the light of recent investigations «Szczerbiec» can be dated to the 13th century and connected with Boleslaw († 1248) prince of Sandomierz and Mazovia, son of prince Konrad Mazowiecki. «Szczerbiec» is the only Polish medieval sword connected with a concrete historical person.

The subject of our paper is the sword found at Osieczna, distr. Leszno, in Great Poland. It was accidentally found in a lake, and the circumstances of its discovery do not provide any exact data about this specimen. The sword is actually kept in the Museum at Leszno (Fig. 1).

The characteristic features of the sword are as follows: this is a battle sword with a comparatively broad, two-edged blade, widest at the top, contracting sharply to the distance of 4 cm. from the top of the blade, and then tapering off to the point which is broken at the end. The fairly broad two-sided fuller occupies c. 1/3 or slightly more of the blade breadth, beginning at the tang and disappearing c. 23 cm. from the preserved end of the blade. The guard is straight, fairly, short, massive, square-like in section, slightly tapered on both sides of the top of the blade and slightly thickened on the axis of the fuller. The tang is broad, massive, broadest at the top of the blade, rectangular in section,

¹ A. NADOLSKI: *Szczerbiec - the Polish Coronation Sword*, in «The Journal of the Arms and Armour Society», vol. VI, no. 6, June 1969, pp. 183-184; the same, *Szczerbiec (Epée de sacre polonaise Szczerbiec)*, in *Na granicach archeologii: «Acta Archaeologica Lodziensia»*, no. 17, Łódź, 1968, p. 105, there is also the former literature.

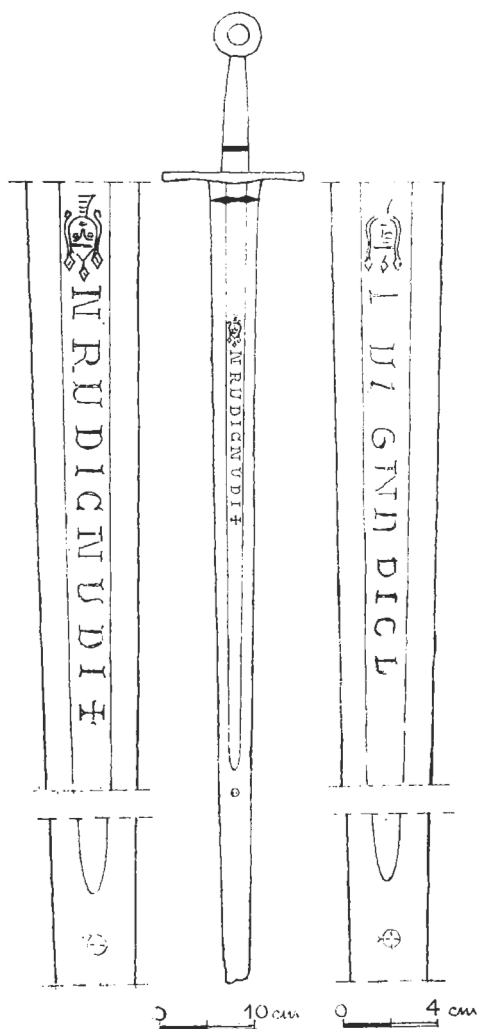


FIG. 1.—*The sword from Osieczna, distr. Leszno (des. J. Wieczorek).*

slightly contracted and curved towards the pommel. The pommel is nearly round, thick and faceted. The tang rivet of the hilt is invisible (?).

DECORATIONS AND INSCRIPTION

Both the blade faces are covered with the remains of nearly identical decorations and inscriptions made of yellow metal, set (probably hammered in) into the previously carved grooves. The metal has almost



FIG. 2.—*Crowned head on the sword* (Photo: K. Pieszyńska).

completely disappeared and thus the content of the images can be deduced from the engraved grooves only. On the fuller, c. 13 cm. from the top of the blade, there is a crowned head, 3,5 cm. in length, with the top of the crown turned towards the point (Fig. 2). On the gently curved neck, bearing the traces of three horizontal lines—maybe the remains of the gown—there is mounted an almond-shaped male face, framed with curly hair slightly tucked in and gently falling down to the level a little above the chin. The anatomic features of the face include

the mouth marked with two half-arches, the eyes composed of two not conterminous horizontal strokes, the lower of which is distinctly curved down, and the nose, drawn with double strokes separating gently into the eyebrow arches. On the head, on the prolongation of the external line of the curls, there is a high cone-shaped (?) crown, terminating in three points crowned with lozenges. The two side-points are shorter, the central one surpassing them by the length of lozenge. The oblique strokes of the lozenges probably mark the additional decoration of the crown tops. Right behind the crown there is a ten-letter inscription (height of the letters c. 11-12 mm.), written in the capital, slightly similar to the uncial, composed of the letters NRUDICNUDĪ, ended with a cross with equal arms, c. 6 mm. long. (Fig. 3). The end of the cross arm is

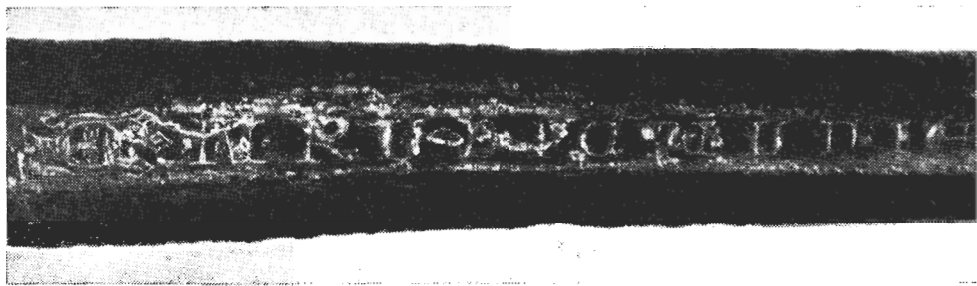


FIG. 3.—Part of the blade with figure and inscription.

situated 36 cm. from the top of the blade. On the vertical axis of the sword, 64 cm. from the top of the blade, there is a circle of c. 8 mm. in diameter, containing horizontal strokes of 2-3 mm. placed side by side, which probably are fragments of an equal-armed cross inscribed into the circle. The figures and inscriptions of the second face of the sword are visible less clearly, though they are situated analogically to those described above. The details of the king's head are indistinct. Only the right eye, the external lines of the curls and the crown terminals are well marked. In spite of the fragmentary nature of the inscription it is permissible to think that it consisted of different letters than the previous one. These are: ?, U, ?, C or G, ?, N, D, I, C, L. Only a small fragment of the arm of the cross, ending the inscription, is visible. On the other hand, the circle intersected by four unconnected arms of the cross is more distinct.

MEASUREMENTS OF THE SWORD

Overall length 103 cm. (preserved); length of the blade 84,7 cm. (preserved); length of guard 15,2 cm.; breadth of blade 5,7 cm.; height of guard 0,8 cm.; height of pommel 5 cm.; breadth of pommel 5 cm.; length of tang 12,2 cm.; largest breadth of tang 3 cm.

In the light of the typology of European swords as worked out by A. Bruhn Hoffmeyer² the sword from Osieczna can be assigned to group III, or —to be more exact— to group IIIc. According to Oakeshott's typology³ we can assign the blade of the sword to type XII. The guard is of an intermediary form between types 3 and 2, but the massive pommel corresponds with type I according to the same classification system. Accordingly, the sword can be defined as follows: type XII, I, 3 to 2. Five swords of this type are known from the Polish area and generally dated as the 13th century⁴. R. E. Oakeshott did not establish a precise chronology for European swords of type XII, dating them generally as from the second half of the 12th century to the first half of the 14th century, though they are most frequent in the 13th century⁵. We think that the sword from Osieczna should be assigned to the 13th century, though by comparing it with other swords of this type a more exact date, i. e. the second half of the 13th century, can be suggested.

The representation of the king's head on the sword, drawn with a soft line in spite of the considerable resistance of the material, is an undoubted work of art. The gentle curve of the neck, the light outline of the long curls and the shape of the face, make us see in this image a fine example of a king's portrait of the classic Gothic art. The general character of the representation is close to that of prince Henryk IV Probus on his tombstone, dating from the turn of the 13th/14th centuries⁶. We think that the dating of the representation on the Osieczna sword to the second half of the 13th century is very plausible, because

² A. BRUHN-HOFFMEYER: *Middelalderens tveæggede svaerd*, København, 1954, vol. 1, p. 44.

³ R. E. OAKESHOTT: *The Sword in the Age of Chivalry*, New York/Washington, 1965, p. 37.

⁴ M. GŁOSEK und A. NADOLSKI: *Miecze średniowieczne z ziem polskich (with English summary: Medieval Sword from Polish Territories)*: «Acta Archaeologica Lodziensia», no. 19, Łódź, 1970, catalogue nos. 3, 4, 16, 25, 60.

⁵ R. E. OAKESHOTT: *op. cit.*, pp. 37-40.

⁶ T. DOBRZENIECKI: *Wrocławski pomnik Henryka IV*, Warszawa, 1964; J. KEBŁOWSKI: *Pomniki Piastów Śląskich (with English summary: Monuments of Silesian. Piasts in the Middle Ages)*. Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk, 1971, pp. 44-72, phot. 6-9.

it is well placed in the art of this time. On the other hand, it is difficult as well as risky to connect this representation with some definite workshop or even with a country. In this case we should confine ourselves to the statement that it represents the characteristic form of the 13th century Gothic art and that its workmanship shows an artist not only sensitive but also eagerly accepting and understanding the style of the time.

The representation of the crown deserves attention. Its proportions are Gothic, and within the compass of this style one should seek analogies. The Gothic crowns from before the middle of the 14th century, known from iconography and a few preserved monuments⁷ (when the characteristic high fleurons became common) have typical fleur-de-lis terminals which should be expected to occur in the representation under discussion. However we seem to deal here with a schematic drawing. This statement is supported by the only representation of the crown known from the sword blade. It is presented twice on the sword which dates from the second half of the 13th century and is connected with the Bohemian king Przemysl Otakar II and his second crusade against the Prussians⁸. The circles placed on both sides of the sword beneath the fuller demand consideration. We think they are sword-marks, i. e. marks made on the blade by the artisan or workshop, where the blade was finally polished, put together and mounted. Though it is hard to reconstruct fully the original shape of the mark because of the poor state of its preservation, we can state that the combinations composed of crosses and circles are among the most popular sword-marks in whole medieval Europe⁹.

Let us proceed now to analyse the inscription on the Osieczna sword¹⁰. The letters on both sides are not equally preserved. In the inscription NRUDICNUDI, written mostly in capital, the first letter U oscillates towards the uncial. The inscription on the other side is also

⁷ P. E. SCHRAMM: *Herrschaftszeichen und Staatssymbolik*, in *Schriften der Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, Stuttgart, 1954, vol. 3.

⁸ H. SEGER: *Ein Prunkschwert aus der Zeit der Kreuzzüge*, in «Schlesiens Vorzeit in Bild und Schrift NF.», Bd. 6, 1912, p. 79; P. BOHM: *König Ottokars Schwert*, in «Schlesiens Vorzeit...», Bd. 8, 1924, p. 41; B. BRACKMANN und W. UNWERZAGT: *Zantoch, eine Burg in deutschen Osten*, Leipzig, 1936, pp. 137-138; A. BRUHN-HOFFMEYER: *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 21, no. 93; M. GŁOSEK und A. NADOLSKI: *op. cit.*, catalogue no. 54.

⁹ M. GŁOSEK: *Znaki i napisy na mieczach średniowiecznych w Polsce (Marks and inscriptions on sword from the Polish territories)*, type writing, Łódź, 1971 (in press).

¹⁰ We'd like to thank doc. dr. R. Rosin of History Institute of University of Łódź for his help in the inscription analyze.

written in capital with an addition of uncial. The letter U is completely uncial, the next N is more uncial than capital. There remains the question of deciphering the letters in this inscription. The first letter—as follows from its distance to the next one—is the incomplete letter N with only one stroke preserved. Analogically, the third letter is only in fragment, as is suggested by the empty place before the next letter G. Its shape suggests that we deal with the letter A. The last letter in this inscription is L, though it might be the fragment of letter D. Thus, in our opinion the inscription would read NUAGNNNDICL. Most of the letters in each inscription are shaded and seem to be patterned after lapidary writing. The whole represents the Romanesque writing, except the letter D in the first inscription, which definitely refers to the Gothic writing.

As mentioned above, the inscription on the sword from Osieczna belongs to the comparatively numerous group of inscriptions, in which the group of three letters DIC (DIG?) runs. This group was discussed by R. Wegeli¹¹, who analysed 9 swords with these inscriptions. Though only few specimens have been localized, it seems permissible to connect them with North Europe. The recent finds also can confirm the thesis that they were used and perhaps produced in the area which included Mecklenburg, Brandenburg and North-West Poland¹².

The Osieczna specimen differs from swords of the DIC group in having the king's head engraved on it, which has no analogies in the European material¹³. The co-appearance of the inscription DIC with the figurative representation places our specimen among the most interesting European swords. The figurative images on medieval swords are generally very rare and that is why they should be discussed. As an example we ought to mention the sword of emperor Albrecht II, made in Passau c. 1438, and kept until the Second World War in Berlin's Zeughaus¹⁴. Both sides of its discs-shaped pommel are covered with coats of arms, with the figure of an eagle on the first, and a rampant lion on the second. The most interesting swords for us are those with

¹¹ R. WEGELI: *Inschriften auf mittelalterlichen Schwertklingen*, in «Zeitschrift für Historische Waffenkunde», Bd. 3, 1902-1905, pp. 177-183, 218-225, 261-268, 290-300.

¹² U. SCHOKNECHT: *Bemerkenswerte mittelalterliche Neufunde aus dem Bezirk Neubrandenburg*, in *Bodendenkmalpflege in Mecklenburg*, Jbb., 1970, Berlin, 1971, p. 284; the same, *Ein Fund mittelalterlicher Waffen von Levetzow, kreis Wismer, there*, Jbb., 1967, p. 283.

¹³ The analogy is also unknown to dr. O. Gamber, the Keeper Waffensammlung in Viens. Letter of 5. 09. 1972 in the authors' possession.

¹⁴ M. J. BINDER: *Ein Königsschwert im Zeughaus*, in «Zeitschrift für Historische Waffenkunde», Bd. 6, 1912-1914, p. 25.

figurative motifs on blades similar to the Osieczna specimen. Worthy of note is the sword connected with the German king, Rudolf I Habsburg the meritorious creator of his house's power¹⁵. Both sides of its blade are covered by thirteen-letters inscriptions with two coats of arms beneath: one with the figure of the eagle, the other with rampant lion. An interesting specimen is the sword, probably derived from South German workshops and connected with Przemysł Otakar II¹⁶, kept presently at Vienna (Waffensammlung A34W). It is dated by O. Gamber to the years between 1253 and 1278. On one of its faces there is the inscription TEVDIS and an obliquely placed heraldic shield, crowned with the pot helmet with the crest terminating in a plume. On the other face there is the inscription RC or GFBNA, and the crowned rampant lion. Another sword connected with Przemysł Otakar II, and mentioned above, was found at Santok¹⁷. On both its faces, at the top of the blade, there are two coats of arms, one with the Przemysłides' crowned lion, the other with a cross. Under the latter, on the face of the blade, there is a badly preserved reversed drawing. It presents a heavy armoured knight on horseback, with a pot helmet over which a crown has been placed. Above, there is a rampant lion (?), and further on, figures of three heavy-armed men holding spears, with heads covered with pot helmets crowned with gems. There is consensus of opinion that this drawing represents Przemysł Otakar II, leading a crusade. It is believed that this sword was offered to the king of Bohemia by the Teutonic Knights during his raids against the Prussians. The dating of the sword is controversial. Recently it has been connected with the second crusade undertaken by Przemysł Otakar II in 1267¹⁸. A close analogy is represented by the sword (mentioned by R. Wegeli) of type XII (?), dated to the second half of the 13th century, kept at the turn of the 19th/20th centuries in the Szczecin Museum and probably found in the neighbourhood of Szczecin¹⁹. Both faces of its blade bore majuscular inscriptions reading DICNLACDICLA (one of these had an additional letter E at the end). The letter C may be —as in many cases of the inscriptions of the group DIC— deciphered as G. One of faces bears the representation of an

¹⁵ O. GAMBER: *Die mittelalterlichen Blankwaffen der Wiener Waffensammlung*, in «Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien», Bd. 57, 1961, N. F., Bd. 21, p. 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁷ Compare annotation no. 8.

¹⁸ Recently M. Głosek has been proposing this date. Marks and inscriptions... The other suggestions connect this sword with 1255.

¹⁹ R. WEGELI: *op. cit.*, pp. 265-267; *The literature on this sword is collected by M. Głosek, ibid.*, catalogue no. 59.

eagle, the other, a rampant lion, both engraved above the inscription, near the top of the blade. It is clear from the above examination that most of the swords provided with figurative representations of symbolic character are connected with concrete historical persons placed at the top of the feudal hierarchy.

Summing up the results of our considerations we think that the sword from Osieczna can be connected with the representative of the top of the feudal hierarchy from the area of East Germany and West Poland in the second half of the 13th century.

Having left the solid ground of facts, we can now try to connect the Osieczna sword with a concrete historical person. As it seems, this should be a person distinguished by exorbitant ambitions and acting in the broad area of the Odra zone in the second half of the 13th century. It is difficult to look for such a person among the representatives of the East German feudal lords, for in the so called great interregnum period (1254-1275) and also during Rudolf Habsburg's († 1291) reign the whole East Germany was controlled by Magdeburg archbishops. On the other hand, on the territories on the opposite side of the Odra, there were in the second half of the 13th century two historic persons, who aimed at a royal crown. The first is the Piast prince, Henryk IV Probus (1257/8-1290) of the Silesian line who was brought up at the Bohemian king Przemysl Otakar's II court. From 1270 he was the prince of Wrocław, and from 1288, temporarily, the prince of Cracov, thus being the ruler of the town which in the 13th century mentality was connected with the supreme power in Poland and with the royal crown. Henryk IV Probus coronation projects are known from the not very reliable chronicle of Ottokar of Styria²⁰, and their most full reflections can be found on the sarcophagus tombstone of the young prince, who was laid to rest in St. Cross Church in Wrocław²¹. The crowned «Cracovian» eagle presented on the tombstone is on the heraldic shield on the left to the prince's head. So far it is the only representation of this kind in the whole rich iconography associated with this ruler.

We think that more attention should be paid to the Piast Prince of the Great Polish line, i. e. to Przemysl II (1257-1296) who in 1295 crowned his efforts by coronation as the Polish king. Many things indicate that he set store by a symbolic assertion of his royal aspirations. Of great importance is the fact that in 1290 he abandoned his father's coat of arms, i. e. the lion. On the two seals from the same year he is

²⁰ O. OSTERREICHISCHE REIMCHRONIK: «M. G. H. Deutsche Chroniken», vol. V, 1890.

²¹ Compare annotation no. 6.

represented with the heraldic shield emblazoned with the crowned eagle, i. e. the so called «Cracovian» eagle²². Of particular interest is the so called second seal, i. e. the seal, used from October 1290 until the coronation of Przemysł II. The «Cracovian» crowned eagle on the shield of this seal is closely connected with the prince's claims to Cracov which he had just lost. After his coronation, Przemysł II changed his seal into one of the majestic type, with visible attributes of royal authority. The obverse of this seal shows the crowned eagle on the shield, surrounded by a legend reading + REDDIDIT . IPSE . P/OTENS . V/ICTRICIA . SIGNA . POLONIS. In spite of the badly preserved copy of the seal and the controversy as to the middle words the words «reddidit... signa Polonis» clearly underline the importance of the restoration of the Polish Kingdom and the aspirations of Przemysł II²³.

Janko of Czarńków, the Polish chronicler living in the 14th century, left another interesting mention connected with Przemysł II. Namely, when on March 31, 1371, a storm destroyed a part of the Poznań cathedral, a polichromy (?) presenting this ruler was destroyed «... quod foramina per testudinem capellae regalis impetu suo faciens imagines regis Premislai et reginae in parietibus elevatas et depictas concussit...»²⁴.

It should also be mentioned that probably during his stay at Cracow Przemysł II, with the consent of the bishop of Cracow, Paweł of Przemanków, took the crown and other royal insignia, kept in the Wawel Castle treasury since Bolesław Śmiały's coronation, which took place in Cracow in 1066, and deposited them in the Gniezno cathedral treasury, having used them on June 26, 1295, i. e. on the day of his coronation as the king of Poland²⁵. We think that the sword under discussion, decorated as it is by the image of a crowned monarch, may be regarded as an expression of the not yet fulfilled coronation ambitions of Przemysł II from the years 1290-1295. Though the hypothesis is doubtless attractive we believe that it can be confirmed only by future researches and new finds.

²² F. PIEKOSIŃSKI: *Pieczęcie polskie wieków średnich*, Kraków, 1899, p. 134, nos. 201, 205, fig. 152, 3; compare the seal of Przemysł of 1252, there, fig. 108.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 144, nos. 216, 217, figs. 160-161.

²⁴ *Joannes de Czarńków Chronicon Polonorum*, elaborated by J. Szlachetkowski, in *Monumenta Poloniae Historica*, ed. A. Bielowski, vol. II, Warszawa, 1961, p. 651.

²⁵ O. BALZER: *Królestwo Polskie*, Lwów, 1919, vol. I, pp. 237-238; J. BASZKIEWICZ: *Powstanie zjednoczonego Państwa Polskiego (na przełomie XIII i XIV wieku)*, Warszawa, 1964, p. 262; the same, *Polska czasów Łokietka*, Warszawa, 1968; K. JASIŃSKI: *Tragedia rogozińska 1296 r. na tle rywalizacji wielkopolsko-brandeburskiej o Pomorze Gdańskie*, in «Zapiski Historyczne», vol. XXVI, 1961.