

Ancient History Preceding Poland Part 1

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Introduction

Poland was not organized as a nation-state until the 10th century under the Piast princes, which was a rather late date in the course of European development. In order to understand the factors that led to the formation of Poland, a chronological summary of the preceding ancient history is outlined for the reader. Since 800 BCE [Before the Common Era, *Common Era is the same as Christian Era*], nomadic tribes from the Altai region of Central Asia had established the course of their migrations to the new lands of Europe. It is a fascinating tale of conflicts and displacement of the pre-existing inhabitants, from which Poland emerged as a powerful nation.

800 BCE - Early Asian migrations to Europe:

Asian migrations to Europe occurred as early as 800 BCE. Due to increasing cultural pressure from the Chinese, Eurasian nomads were driven westward from the Altai region of present-day Mongolia. Nomadic Scythian tribes were among the earliest inhabitants of the Altai region, who migrated to Europe. By 600 BCE, the Scythians settled a region north of the Black Sea. Slavs, who were living in the Black Sea region, were forced to migrate further north.

600 BCE - Scythian history:

The reason for Scythian migration to the Caucasus and Ukraine is unknown. However, it is believed that the migration occurred between 800 and 600 BCE. Scythians were the first great pastoral nomadic group in Central Asia. Greek writers, such as Homer and Herodotus, described Scythian costumes with open tunics and padded and quilted leather trousers that were tucked into boots.

Vast territories were required to graze livestock that were critical for survival of the small bands of Scythian horsemen. Increases in population could exceed the abundance from pastoral lands that supported them. In the process of the expanding migrations, the Scythians displaced other peoples. Scythians ranged over great distances. They lived in felt tents and subsisted on mare's milk and cheese in addition to any fish or game that was hunted. Western Scythians were agriculturalists, who raised wheat for consumption, as well as export. During spring and summers, the Scythians ranged far distances seeking adequate pastures to feed their livestock. In wintertime, the tribes settled along the river valleys. Men rode horseback, while the women drove the oxen-wagons filled with their portable belongings. Wealthy Scythians were polygamous and sons could inherit their father's wives.

Evidence of the earliest Scythian settlements has been excavated in the Altai region of Asia. They migrated first to the Ural Mountains and then to the Volga River region, Black Sea, and to the Sub-Carpathian region, where they most likely encountered Slav settlements. Eventually, Scythians settled in the Mediterranean region. They were famous for their horses with saddles, which enabled them to conquer lands from the Steppes of Eurasia to southern Europe. Saddles provided the Scythians with a stable platform and archery skills, which made them menacing warriors and also desirable as mercenaries.

Scythians also migrated to the Caucasus region and the Oxus River in Central Asia. They continued to expand to the Indus River in India and the Ganges River south of the Himalayan Mountain Range. Their empire became vast and they spread to Persia, the Caspian Sea area, the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, and then occupied regions in Anatolia, the Middle East, the Nile, and the Red Sea regions.

Scythian tribes were divided into small hordes, who selected a king. They used saddles on their horses to attack enemies and maintained supremacy by using their military organization as well

as guerrilla tactics. They could fire many arrows accurately while mounted. When the hail of arrows was exhausted, the Scythians would turn away to re-arm before returning to attack and overwhelm the enemy. During those battles, Greeks had ridden horses bareback, so the Scythians had a definite advantage by using saddles. Later, another Asian tribe, the Sarmatians, defeated the Scythians by incorporating bronze armor plates sewn into their woolen or leather garments, which could withstand the hail of arrows during battle. As a defense, the Sarmatians developed highly effective lances that were fifteen feet in length.

Early Scythian settlements in the northern Black Sea region were peaceful. Their economy was based upon trade with the Greek colonies, who had migrated to the region in order to trade goods and export food and materials back to their home Greek populations. Cattle, hides, furs, timber, wax, honey, and grain, were traded to the Greeks in exchange for olive oil, wine, and textiles. Scythians were excellent traders and used the river routes to make contact with the Greeks at the Black Sea. Scythians also controlled a large slave trade.

Scythians buried their deceased members in high barrow structures called, "kurgans." The tombs were covered with larch wood. Large stones and boulders were added for further protection. Scythians were buried with their axes, arrowheads and clothing. Females were buried in the same fashion, which gave rise to the Greek myth about women Amazons serving as warriors. The burial mounds have provided archeologists with much of the knowledge about Scythian culture.

Tombs included gold jewelry and materials, silk cloth, along with sacrificed horses and humans. Permafrost helped to preserve the relics. All of the items that a Scythian might need in his after-life were included with the burial. The richest people were buried with their horses; ordinary people were buried with utensils. One grave included a carpet, which was the oldest oriental pile rug ever found. Burials have also helped archeologists to understand the history of peoples currently inhabiting Central Asia, the Gorno-Altai region of Mongolia, Kirghiztan, and Kazakhstan.

Scythian gold work was refined and superb. Their techniques were learned from the Greeks. Sculptures of Scythian men showed beards and long hair typical of Europeans. Gold was also utilized as decorations on horse's gear and as ornaments on weapons. Often the decorations utilized animal motifs, such as winged griffins attacking horses, battling stags, deer, eagles, or milking ewes. An early Scythian tomb depicted gold objects of more primitive animal motifs; probably a style known to them prior to learning the more refined techniques from the Greeks. One ancient royal tomb contained forty-four pounds of gold adornments.

The appearance of gold crafts among the Scythians coincided with Assyrian gold art from the 8th century BCE. Scythians allied with Assyria against the Medes, who were rising to power in the region of northern Persia in the 7th century BCE. That was coincident with the history of the Assyrian invasion of Syria, Phoenicia, and the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Contact with the peoples of Luristan and Media, north of Assyria, could have influenced the timing and use of gold crafts among the Scythians. Perhaps the gold items themselves were imported or the craftsmen may have been taken as prisoners.

Scythians spoke an Indo-European tongue that was closely related to Iranian. However, there was no written language. There were many dialects. Sarmatians also spoke a dialect of the early Iranian language. The earliest Iranian language was called Gathic Avestan. Avestan was related to Old Persian, from which the modern Iranian language was derived. Ossetic was another language that is related to Gathic Avestan and was spoken in the Caucasus region. Ossetic was thought to be descendant from the language spoken by both the Scythian and Iranian Sarmatians, who followed them. Apparently, the Ossetic spoken language was called Ironig or Ironski,

which is Iranian. Another theory, but not currently accepted, espoused that Scythian was a Turkic language.

600 BCE - The Earliest Slavs:

The earliest Slavs settled in Central Europe and in the region of the Carpathian Mountains about 600 BCE. There were several theories about Slav origins. Ancient Prussians, Lithuanians, Letts, Jadzwing, and Zmuds, who spoke Slavic dialects settled Northern Europe. East of them were the Ugro-Finnish peoples, who settled in a semi-circle from the Riga River to the lower Volga River. Linguistic research led to different conclusions about Slav origins. Teutons originally settled the region of the Carpathian Mountains. On the western side of the Teutons were the Celts. The Prussians and Lithuanians inhabited the Northern Minsk region. Letts and Ugro-Finns settled from the middle Volga region to central Russia and the northern part of Poland and Prussia.

Another theory about Slav origins claimed that they settled the region of the Niemen River, wedged between the Ugro-Finns to the north and the Teutons in the Carpathian Mountains. The Slavs were Indo-Europeans and not from Ugro-Finnish origins. The Slavs were forced by the Ugro-Finnish peoples to migrate southward, where they occupied the middle Volga River region. They occupied the villages that had been abandoned by the Teutons and Celtic peoples, who had migrated westward. Apparently, the Slavs originated in the Carpathians and Vistula areas. The Slavs then migrated in all directions to the Don River in the east, the shores of the Baltics in the north along the Elbe and Oder Rivers, and the Adriatic Sea in the south. They also migrated as far to the west as the Rhine River and to the mouth of the Vistula River.

Slavic tribes split into three linguistic groups by the 7th century CE. Eastern Slavs settled along the Dnieper River, which is now Ukraine. Slavs spread northward to the Volga River valley, east of modern-day Moscow. Slavs also spread westward to the basins of the northern Dniester River and the western branch of the Bug River, in present-day southern Ukraine and Moldavia.

Having overthrown the Avars, by 605 CE, Slavs expanded to the regions of the Upper Volga, Dvina, Vistula, Oder, and Elbe Rivers, to the Frankish boundaries. Slavs moved to control the Balkans in 650 CE. Huns, who had settled in the region of the Don River, replaced the Slavs, and formed the Khanate of Great Bulgaria. They were known as the Bulgars.

Early Slavs burned the corpses of their deceased members. Later, they developed more elaborate burials, which included decorations, implements, utensils, and weapons. Slav graves contained ear chains made from rings and earrings that were made from twisted bronze wires, as well as wooden pails with iron hoops, and carved or ornamented urns, and other earthenware.

Teutons pushed Slav tribes eastward, where they settled along the Warthe (Warta), Oder, and Notze (Notec) Rivers. Slavs inhabited agricultural fields and were known by the name, *Polanie*. "Pole" was the Slavic word, which meant field. Polanie reclaimed forests with access to the rivers and lakes where there was plentiful food. They were peaceful agriculturalists.

Raids by Norsemen prompted the Slavs to form defensive forces. Protection by military bands allowed for the cultivation of their fields. Fortified towns (grody) developed, where the business of the tribes was conducted, trade or barter occurred, and some form of communal worship was possible. Stored goods could be defended. Tribal disputes were settled in the grody.

Fortified towns became Polanie centers. There were important towns, such as Kruszwica, located on Lake Goplo; Gniezno, also called Gnesen by the Germans; and Knezno, which was taken from the word, Knez, the residence of a prince or duke. Poznań also developed as a vital town center in the west.

Two important tribes are notable, the Lenczanians and the Mazurs. They were armed and in opposition. The most savage of them, the Mazurs, eventually came under control of the *Piast Dynasty* of princes.

Located north of the Slavs was a tribe known as the *Pomorzanie*. They were conquered and came under the control of the Polanie. In Polish, Po means “by” and “morze” means the sea. *Pomorze* meant “by the sea.” The Teutons changed the name to *Pomerania*. The Polanie attained access to the Baltic Sea, Scandinavia, and the numerous regional rivers on which they could carry out trading with the Romans, Byzantines, and Scandinavians.

Between the 8th and 9th centuries, the Polanie transformed from agricultural and village settlements to a militaristic and structured society that was governed by the princes.

200 BCE - Sarmatians:

The Sarmatians were another Asiatic tribe from the Altai region. They were very aggressive and utilized armor in their attacks, which aided them in battles against the Scythians, Romans, and Macedonians. Sarmatians aided the Parthians of northern Persia, which revived the Iranian Empire. By the 3rd century CE, Sarmatians aligned themselves with the Alanians; later, the Alanians allied with the Goths. The Sarmatians defeated and displaced the few remaining Scythians, who migrated to the Crimea and the southern Danube delta in Dobruja.

About 200 BCE, the Sarmatians migrated into southern Russia. They were a dominant culture for the next 400 years until 200 CE. By that time, 200 CE, Roman forces had replaced the Greek settlements in the region and reigned from the Black Sea to the northern region of the Caspian Sea. The Slavs were forced northward to the Vistula River. By the middle of the 6th century the Sarmatians converted to Christianity.

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