

Ancient History Preceding Poland Pt. 2

by Robert S. Sherins, M.D.

200 CE – Goths:

By 200 CE, the Goths, then a Baltic tribe, rose to power and dominated the region of the Black Sea to the Dniester, Bug, Dnieper, and Don Rivers. They originated in the region between the Oder and Vistula Rivers in the middle of the 3rd Century, which was the location that was later occupied by Poland. An old and unproven Goth legend claimed that they were a Baltic tribe, who came from Gothiscandza, southern Scandinavia.

The origin of the Goth name may have been taken from the root-word, Gut. Language specialists, philologists, have suggested that the word, Gut-iuda, was the name of the Gothic people, which may have been taken from the earlier Greek word, Gutthones. Gut is identical to the Baltic word, Gotland, an island in the Baltic Sea. The Swedish word, Gutnish meant Gotland in the same manner that lamb can be used to mean sheep and the Swedish word, Gotar, and the Anglo-Saxon word, Geatas, may have been the name that became the proto-German word, Gauta. Philologists believed that the warriors from Gotland invaded the region of northern Poland to take control of the amber resources. Perhaps that was the origin of the Goth peoples.

The Goths made a major expansion to the Black Sea about 200 CE and defeated the Sarmatians. The Gothic army crossed the Danube in 238 to demand tribute from the occupying Romans and then withdrew. A second invasion occurred in 250, when the Goths led the army as far as Phillippopolis, Bulgaria (originally Plovdiv, but was renamed Phillippopolis after conquest by Phillip II of Macedonia in 432 BCE).

In 251, the Goths defeated the Roman Emperor Decius on the lower Danube and defeated the Roman army at Abrittus in 251. Goths made sea-borne raids to conquer Trebizond, located on the Black Sea coastline of northern Turkey. They also led a massive invasion to Asia Minor, where they plundered properties and took slaves.

Goths converted to Christianity in the 4th century and were led by the native Goth, Ulfila, who created the Gothic alphabet. The Bible was also translated into Gothic.

In 267 CE, Goths were one of the first barbarian forces to attack the Roman Empire. But, Roman Emperor Aurelia destroyed the Gothic kingdom in the 270's. King Cannabaudes was killed and the Goths were driven back across the Danube River, which ended the vast Gothic Empire. A new group, the Gepids, filled the power vacuum in the region, which resulted in a division among the Goths. The Tervingi branch of the Goths occupied the lands west of the Dniester River that consolidated the realm between the Dniester and the Danube. They settled in the territory of Dacia, which had been abandoned by the Romans. Dacia was the region that later formed Romania. Romans referred to that branch as the Visigoths. The later conquest by the Huns in the Volga region drove the Visigoths westward.

The Greutungi group occupied the region east of the Sea of Azov and were called the Ostrogoths. They were later conquered by the Asiatic Huns in the second half of the 4th century. By 400 CE, the Slav tribes were forced to recognize the reign of the superior Goths.

400 CE - Avars:

The Avars were Mongolian peoples, known to the Chinese as the “Juan-Juan.” They arose in the 4th century CE from Mongol and Turkic groups inhabiting the region along the northern Chinese border. About the same time, Huns, another Asian group from the northern Chinese border area, migrated westward, driving back the Goths, who had preceded them in the 2nd century CE. The accumulative effect of those Asian migrations was the replacement of the Goths and the Germanic tribes, as well as the fall of the Western Roman Empire.

The Avars migrated through western Iran to the Russian steppes and mingled with the Huns and Uighurs. By the 6th century, they migrated to Eastern Europe. A confederation of the Juan-Juan, Huns, and Uighurs were known as the Avars. They established a base located around Belgrade, in present-day Yugoslavia. Their arrival drove the Slavs westward. Avars have since occupied the Balkans.

Tribute was successfully extracted from the Byzantines, which helped to finance the Avar expansion into the Balkan Peninsula. At first, Emperor Justinian refused to pay tribute and was attacked again by the Avars with even greater forces. Justinian was then required to pay huge outlays. Justinian used his tribute payments to engage the Avars to raid and subjugate neighboring Slavs, who had settled in the Balkans. Thus, the Avars expanded into the Balkans.

Avars reached Constantinople, but failed to conquer the capital. In 626, the Avars formed an allegiance with the Persians, Huns, Gepids, and Bulgars, to lay siege on Constantinople. The Avars attacked from the European side of the Bosphorus, while the Persians attacked from the Asiatic side. The siege was not successful, and in the process, the Byzantines destroyed the Persian fleet. The Avars had to abandon their siege.

After the Khagan (king) died, the Avars continued to decline. The Slavs and Bulgars expanded their influence and power in the region. Charlemagne defeated the Avars in 791. By the 9th century, it was the resurgent Bulgars, who reigned.

450 CE – Huns:

Huns also originated in Central Asia and were Turkic speakers. Chinese references mentioned the peoples of the Xiong-Nu, or Hsiung-nu, in 1200 BCE. Korean legend also talked about the northern Altaic tribes under a “Huan” ruler in the 8th millennium BCE, which pre-dated the establishment of China.

Huns were a horse-based culture, which maintained a state of readiness and mobility that permitted them to achieve military superiority. They migrated westward to the Ukrainian steppes and merged with the Avars and Magyars. In Europe, the Huns united the Alan, Slavic, and Gothic tribes under Hun rule. They were savage and barbaric, which played out in the eventual downfall of the Roman Empire.

Huns reigned over a large area north of the Caspian Sea by 360 CE and continued to move westward, dominating wherever they settled. They drove out the Goths, who preceded them. Eventually, the Huns reigned over areas from the Volga River to the Rhine River.

The most powerful and ruthless Hun monarch was Attila. A confederation of Hunnic tribes united about 420 CE. Leadership was seized by Attila, who murdered his brother, Bleda, to gain control of the group. The Huns extorted tribute from Romans, as well as

from the Slavs, Avars, and Sarmatians. Hun mercenaries were even loaned to the Romans to bolster their forces. Within fifty years, Attila led the Huns to dominate Europe from the Baltics in the north to the Rhine River in the west and to the Danube River in the south. Huns occupied the Caucasus, north of the Caspian Sea, and as far to the east as the Oxus River north of Persia. They controlled territories from the Baltics to the Caspian Sea by 450 CE. Hun success was based upon plunder, looting, and tribute. They did not develop their own resources or agriculture upon which they could depend. Attila remained powerful until his defeat by the Franks at Orléans.

Valentinian III ruled the Western Roman Empire, but the army was controlled by the warlord, Aétius. Aétius assembled forces from the Franks and Visigoths, in addition to his own Roman-Germanic army. Attila was defeated in 451 at the battle of the Catalaunian Fields near Chalons-sur-Marne. Although the Huns were soundly beaten, they were allowed to escape. Instead of annihilation, Attila was able to lead his remaining forces to Milan, where he devastated Northern Italy. The Huns approached the walls of Rome, but Rome was spared because Attila learned of a bigger threat from the Eastern Empire and turned back his troops.

In 453, while in a drunken stupor, Attila suffocated from a massive nosebleed. With his death, the reign of the Huns declined. By 500 CE, Huns retreated to the regions of the lower Don and Volga Rivers. Subsequent invaders in Europe have been referred to as Huns. That was the origin of the name Hungary; the nickname, Huns, was given to the German army.

650 to 750 CE – Khazars:

Khazars were nomadic Oghuric Turkic people, who migrated from Central Asia during the 5th century. They first settled on the Russian steppes. Some Khazars were reported to have had reddish hair. Their language was Turkic Oghur and their religion was Shamanistic. Later, the kingdom consisted of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. All religions were well tolerated. Jewish refugees came from both Byzantium and Persia and settled in the kingdom.

The Khazarian kingdom was ruled by a succession of Kok Turks, who were also known as Celestial Blue Turks. Their empire lasted 800 years from the 5th to 13th century. Khazars from Asia spread from the Oxus River to the region of the Dniester. From 550 to 630 CE, they had to pay tribute to the Huns, whose reign was already established. Later, the Khazars became part of the Western Turkish Empire.

Khan Bulan adopted Judaism in 861 in order to preserve his rule in face of mounting pressures from his neighbors in the Persian Islamic Empire and the Byzantine Christian Empire. Khazarians spoke both Hebrew and Slavic and settled in cities throughout the northern Caucasus and Ukraine. Later, King Obadiah established Jewish schools and synagogues. In the 10th century, it was estimated that 35,000 Jews lived in Khazaria.

At the time of its maximum expansion by the 9th century, the kingdom was a vast empire that included the regions of southern Russia, northern Caucasus, eastern Ukraine, Crimea, western Kazakhstan, and northwestern Uzbekistan, as well as the regions of the Sabirs and Bulgars, since the 7th century. Pressure from the Khazarians forced the Bulgars to retreat to the Balkans, where the nation of Bulgaria was founded. Some Bulgars also migrated to the upper Volga River area. Khazarian power extended over neighboring

tribes of the eastern Slavs, Magyars, Pechenegs, Burtas, and the Huns from the northern Caucasus.

Originally, the Caspian Sea was called the Khazar Sea. Modern inhabitants, such as the Azeri, Turks, Persians, and Arabs use the same term. In Turkish, the name of the Sea is Hazar Denizi; in Arabic it is Bahr-ul-Khazar; and in Persian it is Daryaye Khazar. It was the power of the Khazarian Empire that kept the boundary between Islam in Persia and the Arabs from spreading northward past the Caucasus Mountains.

There were several capital cities in the kingdom. The first capital was built at Balanjar, which was discovered at the archeological site of Verkhneye Chir-Yurt. By 720, the Khazars moved the capital to Samandar, a town located on the northern coast of the Caspian Sea. In 750, Itil (or Atil) became the final capital, which had been relocated to the Volga River region and lasted more than 200 years.

Khazarians founded the major city of Kiev. The name, Kiev, was taken from the Turkic words, "Kui," which meant riverbank, and "ev," which meant settlement. The translation from Cyrillic is Kyiev. Later in 834, a fortress made of brick was constructed in Sarkel in the Volga area with the assistance of the Byzantines.

Food staples included rice, fish, barley, wheat, melons, and cucumbers. Hemp was also produced. Khazarians hunted fox, rabbit, and beaver, in order to export furs. Trade along the "silk road" enable them to exchange goods with the Byzantines, Europeans, Azerbaijanis, Uzbeks, Persians, Volga Bulgarians, Chinese, and other Central Asians. Other materials were traded including, silk, candle wax, honey, jewelry, silverware, coins, and spices.

There were two levels of authority within the Khazarian monarchy, which included both a supreme king and a civilian military leader, who was called the "bek." The monarchy was known as the "kagan."

Khazarian culture was liberal and permitted people of all religious persuasions to prosper. Legal courts were composed of members, who came from all religious groups in the kingdom. Khazars made their judgments according to the Hebrew Torah, while other tribes were judged according to their own laws. The official language of the kingdom was the Oghuric Turkic tongue, but in practice, they wrote using Hebrew-Aramaic letters. Many documents have been discovered by archeologists that were written in Hebrew.

Jews from many neighboring regions also immigrated to Khazaria. Crimea had a large Jewish community, which came under control of the Khazars. Jews from Persia, the Byzantine Empire, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Hungary, Syria, Turkey, and Iraq, sought refuge in Khazaria. Judaism in the Khazarian kingdom balanced the power of their Christian and Muslim neighbors in Byzantium and Persia.

The Khazarian kingdom ended with their devastating defeat by the Kievan Rus in 965. The final act of defeat occurred when Rus Prince Svyatoslav conquered the Khazars at the Sarkel fortress. Itil was conquered about two years later and then the Rus invaded the Balkans. It was said that no Khazarians remained, but it was only the nation that did not survive. Many people migrated and merged with the inhabitants of neighboring regions. Some of the Khazarians migrated and were incorporated into the Jewish communities of Hungary, Romania and Poland.

800 CE – Slav Expansion:

Collapse of the Roman Empire permitted the westward expansion of Slavs. They settled areas east of the Germanic region in Europe and the present-day Czech and Slovak areas. Slavs were divided into three groups. Eastern Slavs were the ancestors of the Russians, Belarussians, and Ukrainians. Western Slavs were the ancestors of the Poles, Czechs, and the Slovaks. Southern Slavs were the ancestors of the Bulgarians, the Serbs, and the Croatians.

In 800 CE, Charlemagne was crowned as Holy Roman Emperor. Europe had evolved from the Dark Ages. His realm reached far beyond the Frankish-Saxony borders into the “unknown territories.” Charlemagne may have thought that “Poles” were primitive and disorganized, because they lived in territories of dense forests, swamps, and treacherous “moving sands.” Slavs, who lived in the “Polish region” were known to be peaceful agriculturalists, who had a simple style of governance. The largest group of Slavs was known as the *Polanie*, the “people of the fields.”

In early Germany, there were two Slavic tribes, the Lusatians and the Polabians, who are extinct today. In Polish, the word “Po” meant “by” and “Laba” meant the “Elbe” river. Possibly, the Polabian name was derived from the Slavic word that referred to the people “by the Elbe.”

Since the 1st century, Roman merchants had sought amber resources from the region inhabited by the Slavs. Romans referred to amber as the “gold of the north.” Slavs from the west traded with the Germanic Saxons; often they warred with each other. Throughout the 8th and 9th centuries, the Polanie remained isolated from the other European groups. They built earthen defensive structures and had places of pre-Christian worship. In the southern regions, the Polanie used open mining and iron smelting practices. Their tribal settlements were smaller and consisted of clusters of homesteads, which were separated by large forests. They were self-sufficient. Historians have thought that the isolation of the Polanie led to the regional strengths of future Polish inhabitants. Isolation also helped to create the subtle dialects of Polish language that differed slightly from those of the Czechs, Bohemians, and other Slavs.

880 CE – Norsemen:

Norse settlers arrived in Novgorod and Kiev by 880 CE. The Viking princes reached Armenia and the Caspian Sea, in their quest for access to the Middle East and the Mediterranean. In the process, the Vikings passed through Novgorod and Kiev. Viking ships also sailed to England, France, and Spain, as well as to Italy and Byzantium via the Mediterranean.

The Norsemen, known as Varangians, dominated Slavic settlements in the region. Slavs were forced to organize a federation, which was called the *Kievan Rus*. Initially the Kievan Rus spoke the Norwegian language. Slavic tribes were disorganized and constantly battling each other. The unified Norse rulers dominated the Slavs. The Rus represented a cultural mixture of Slavs and Scandinavian Norsemen.

The first Norse ruler was Rurik, who led a military expedition against Constantinople in 860 CE. By 880 CE, Kiev was made the capital of the Kievan Rus. The Kievan Rus took tributes from their Slav neighbors to protect them from incursions by the Pecheneg and Khazar tribes. Kievan Rus were a united, aggressive, and expansive culture. Christianity

was adopted by 1000 CE after the marriage of Vladimir to the sister of the Byzantine Emperor. The early Kievan Rus rulers were: 880-912 Oleg; 912-945 Igor; 945-962 – Olga; 962-972 – Sviatoslav; 978-1015 – Vladimir I; and 1019-1054 – Yaroslav.

900 CE – Slav History:

Tribal relationships formed the basis of early Slavic culture. Groups were scattered in large clans called, *gentes*, which were bound by their close familial blood ties. Lands were occupied and held by members from the same common clan or group. An elder patriarch, the *Staroste*, was responsible for directing each clan. He controlled the decisions regarding crops, work allotment, and social order. Property consisted of the tools, which could be moved with the clans. Slavs never had permanent communal households, *zadrugas*. An assembly, *Wiec*, consisted of the adult males in the community, who helped to make decisions for the group.

Individuals did not exist outside of the clan that protected them. Outsiders had to sustain themselves; they were not accepted into a clan. Outsiders either perished or became slaves of a clan. Captured prisoners often became slaves. Even children of slaves could be retained as slaves.

By the 9th-10th centuries, Slaves were used to fortify the key *Polanie* towns. Settlements became increasingly divided into agricultural settlements and other towns, which served to protect the clans (*grody*). “*Grody*” towns were required for increased military protection and civil administration. Military princes were placed in charge of the fortified towns and the slaves were utilized to serve the towns.

Settlements thrived on the production of grain, by supplying bread and fish, or by tending the horses and cattle. People built boats and made military products, such as shields. Settlements were named after the products or industry of its inhabitants. Occupations were often inherited from fathers to sons.

There is only meager information about the religious practices of the early Slavs. Apparently, they deified the phenomena of nature, such as the trees, rivers, and stones. There were supernatural gods, goddesses, and spirits. However, there was no representation of a supreme god or hierarchy of gods. Western Slavs may have shared a common religion with other Indo-European cults, but they lacked a developed ritual.

Whereas the Teutons were aggressive, the Slavs were peaceful. Archeological research in *Pommorze* (Pomerania) produced religious artifacts of the deity of *Swiatowit* (*Swiatowid*) (*Indra*), the Slavic Zeus. In Polish, the word, *Swiatowid*, may have been taken from the root word *Swiat*, which meant “world,” and *widziec*, which meant “to see.” He was depicted with four faces that were capable of seeing everything. He held a cornucopia in his right hand and a sword in his left hand. The Pomeranians worshiped *Perun*, the god of storms; *Welles*, the god of cattle; *Lada*, the goddess of order and beauty; *Marzanna*, the goddess of death; *Dziewanna*, the goddess of spring; *Radegast*, the protector of merchants and guests; and many other minor nymphs, sirens, and fauns.

Slaves believed in immortality of the soul and in an afterworld of punishments or rewards. Funerals became elaborate and there were commemorative days set aside for offerings and prayers for the dead. Some women had special powers of communication

with the dead. Evidence of a class of Slavic priests was found in the Elbe region and on the Island of Rugia (Rugen)

Isolation of the Polanie into the smaller settlements created individualism and self-reliance. Cohesion of Slavs into a nation-state would have to await the future powerful princes of the Piast Dynasty, which was established at Gniezno during the 10th century. European competition and stresses from the “outside world” on the Polanie shaped their need for better protection and organization. The Piast rulers were able to expand their control over the region and neighboring peoples.

Poles were a Slavic culture. Other European Slavs included the following tribes: Obodrichi, Silesians, Czechs, Moravians, Slovaks, Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, Bulgars, Polochanes, Mazovians, Derevlians, Polianians, Volhynians, Slovanians, Viatchians, Krivichians, Radimichians, and Severians.

Modern Slavs are divided by their national and geographical location, as well as their religious, ethno-cultural, and linguistic history. They are a very numerous and complex group of ethnically related, but different peoples, who consolidated and settled into many regions. Mostly, Slavs are divided into the western and eastern ethnic subdivisions, such as:

1. Eastern Slavs, who are made up of the peoples of Russia; Belarus; Ukraine. They include the Ruthenes (Lemko, Bojko, and Hucul); and Poleszucs (transitional between Ukrainians and Belarussians).
2. Western Slavs, who are made of the following peoples: Poles, which includes the Kaschubians, Slovincians, Mazurs, Silesians, Kociewiaczy, Borowiacy, and Warmiaks; Czechs and Moravians; Slovaks; Sorbs, which includes Lusatians and Serb-Lusatians; South Slavs, which include the Bulgarians (and Pomaks), Bosniaacs, Croats (and Istrians and Janjevci), Macedonians (and Torbesh), Serbs (Montenegrins, Bokeljs, Bunjevci, Gorani, Molise Serbs, Gardisce Serbs and Burgenland Serbs) and the Slovenians (Carinthians).

Bibliography:

1. Channon, John: *Historical Atlas of Russia*, Penguin Books, USA, Inc. New York 1995.
2. Gilbert, Martin: *Atlas of Russian History, From 800 BC to the Present Day*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993.
3. Greenbaum, Masha, *The Jews of Lithuania, A History of a Remarkable Community, 1913-1945*, Gefen Publishing House, Inc., Jerusalem, 1995.
4. Levy, Habib: *Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran, The Outset of the Diaspora*, Mazda Publishers, Costa Mesa, California, 1999.
5. Pogonowski, Iwo Ciprian: *Poland A Historical Atlas*, Hippocrene Books, Inc. New York, 1987.
6. Zamoyski, Adam: *The Polish Way, A Thousand-Year History of the Poles and Their Culture*, Hippocrene Books, New York, 1987.

7. On-line web resources:

- a. <http://www.balkin-archive.org>
- b. <http://www.lib.utexas/maps/historical/europe>
- c. <http://countrystudies.us/poland/>
- d. <http://www.poloniatoday.com/history1.htm>
- e. <http://www.insidepoland.pl/htmls/origins.html>
- f. <http://ukraine.uazone.net/history.html>
- g. <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Scythians>
- h. <http://www.silk-road.com/art1/scythian1.shtml>
- i. <http://www.wordiq.com/definition/goths>
- j. <http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Hungary>
- k. <http://www.wordiq.com/definition/huns>
- l. <http://www.wordiq.com/definition/scythian>
- m. <http://www.wordiq.com/definitions/Slavs.htm>
- n. <http://www.pages.sssnet.com/7genex7/where.html>
- o. <http://www.turaniahorse.org/scythians.html>
- p. <http://www.applet-magic.com/sarmatians.htm>
- q. <http://www.fernweb.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/mf/avars.htm>
- r. <http://www.fernweb.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/mf/goths.htm>
- s. <http://www.imninalu.net/Huns.htm>

Ω Ω Ω Ω Ω Ω Ω