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Description for a general public:

Neglected Sources. A Socio-Political History of Poland (until ca. 1300) Based on Liturgical Manuscripts.

Potho, abbot of San Vincenzo al Volturno, had offended Charlemagne. The scandal that Potho brought to light reached Charlemagne himself. The emperor wanted revenge: he ordered Potho to be judged before a papal court. What was the cause of such a scandal? What exactly did Potho do to incite Charlemagne to such extreme action? The answer: going against monastic tradition, Potho refused to pray for Charlemagne as part of his liturgical performance, or religious ritual prayers. However, to reject the prayer meant to reject the ruler and to refuse to acknowledge his supremacy. Potho did not want to accept Charlemagne's rule over the former kingdom of the Longobards, and he did not want to pray for the stability and victory for a Frankish—a foreign—ruler. This rejection led to Potho's troubles.

This briefly described episode from the reign of Charlemagne is only one of many such interactions and confrontations. One can easily assemble enough examples to demonstrate that liturgy was important not only within religious practice, but also as central to social and political phenomena throughout the Middle Ages. Prayers for rulers—like the one rejected by Potho—were not only central to pious practice, but also part of secular government. In the Early Middle Ages, there were no bureaucratic states with highly-developed administrative apparatus. Ritual organized the political life of the community. One of the most important rituals was that of the liturgy.

Although Christian worship played a crucial role in building the identity of medieval kingdoms, the impact of liturgy has long been overlooked by scholars dealing with the socio-political history of Poland. Moreover, even the liturgical sources themselves, which provide an immense insight into the general history of Poland, have yet to be properly examined. Manuscript catalogs and scholarly articles contain incorrect descriptions of the manuscripts, ranging from wrong dates of production, unclear provenance, and even misidentification of the liturgical contents and widespread confusion over the different types of liturgical genres. Furthermore, within the few extant sources that shed light on the general history of Poland, those medieval sacramentaries, pontifical, missals, and other liturgical manuscripts that still exist have not been properly described or included in the narrative of Poland's history. If the liturgical material is included, then it is usually described as some kind of curiosity, or mentioned in chapters on intellectual culture. However, nobody has integrated liturgical material into the socio-political history of Poland. It is high time that this is done.

This proposed project focuses on liturgical sources as a means of developing a more coherent picture of the earliest history of Poland. There are numerous surviving liturgical manuscripts dating from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. Not all of them are clearly connected to the Piasts' realms; thus, the first task of the project is to identify the manuscripts that will enable us to write the history of medieval Poland. This first stage will significantly increase our knowledge of medieval manuscript culture in Poland. In the second stage, I will focus on these sources, and will systematically analyze them so that they can be included into the socio-political narrative. I argue that liturgy was an essential element in the creation of the early medieval state of Piasts. Mieszko I and Bolesław the Brave had to establish their power over the subordinated tribes, and the borders of their realm were constantly fluctuating. Liturgy provided them with theories of civic power as well as tools to integrate the communities of conquered people. Through the ritual invocation of the ruler's name, all subjects were exposed to the ruler's claim to legitimacy and supremacy. Christian worship also sacralized and legitimized political power, while providing a range of tools for its manifestation. However, new Christian texts also limited rulers; liturgy exposed the tasks and virtues that were requisite of a political leader. Furthermore, sacramentaries, missals, pontifical, etc., articulated ideas about the newly established monarchy. After the eleventh century, when there was no Polish monarchy, it was liturgical manuscripts that preserve the idea of kingship. It can be argued that it was also thanks to liturgical manuscripts that the monarchy was restored at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

This proposed research on the liturgical sources is worthwhile not only because the material has been overlooked by Polish scholars, but also because it provides new insights into the most debated topics of Polish historiography: the origins of the early medieval state, the ideology of political power, and the restoration of the Polish kingdom at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Liturgical material provides invaluable contributions to new research avenues, such as the transfer of ideas and objects between established and emergent Christianity, the creation of political and social identity, and the articulation of social values shared by medieval people in Poland. The results of the project are multi-faceted, interdisciplinary, and contribute to many fields of medieval studies.