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## SCANDINAVIAN RUNES VERSUS THE ORIGINS OF THE COATS OF ARMS OF THE POLISH KNIGHTHOOD: THE RUNIC THEORY OF FRANCISZEK PIEKOSIŃSKI

### Abstract

In the following article, the author presents and critically discusses the main assumptions of the theory created in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Polish medievalist Franciszek Piekosiński (1844–1906) on the runic origin of the coats of arms of the medieval Polish knighthood and the most notable opinions of his opponents, which had a considerable influence on its rejection by the academic milieu.

**Key words:** medieval Kingdom of Poland, Polish knighthood, heraldry, coats of arms.

**Słowa kluczowe:** średniowieczna Polska, rycerstwo polskie, heraldyka, herby.

### Introduction

It would be somewhat difficult to imagine a technique of a contemporary Polish medieval historian without the scholarly achievements of Franciszek Piekosiński (1844–1906), who died nearly 110 years ago.<sup>1</sup> A lawyer and a his-

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<sup>1</sup> S. Grodziski, “Piekosiński Franciszek Ksawery (1844–1906), prawnik, historyk, prof. UJ,” [Piekosiński Franciszek Ksawery (1844–1906) — Lawyer, Historian, Professor at Jagiellonian University], [in:] *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* (henceforth: PSB) 26, Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1981, pp. 77–81. See also: J. Wyrozumski, “Franciszek Piekosiński (1844–1906),” [in:] *Ludzie, którzy umiłowali Kraków. Założyciele Towarzystwa Miłośników Historii i Zabytków Krakowa*, ed. W. Bieńkowski, Kraków: Towarzystwo Miłośników Historii i Zabytków Krakowa, 1997, pp. 158–73. A bibliography of the printed material, unfortunately incomplete, was prepared by M. Gumowski, “Dr. Franciszek Piekosiński (Rys życia i prac)” [Dr Franciszek Piekosiński (An Outline of his Life and Works)], *Wiadomości Numizmatyczno-Archaeologiczne* (further: WNA) 18 (1907): pp. 543–548. His scholarly achievements in the field

torian, and from 1891 a professor of Old Polish law at Jagiellonian University, considered “an eccentric and oddity” by his contemporaries, he has been acknowledged as the most eminent source publisher of the history of medieval Poland.<sup>2</sup> Highly disciplined, living and working alone, Piekosiński published over 5,500 documents as well as almost 7,000 judicial notes over a period of 30 years in academic life. Most notably, until he became the chair of the university department, he combined a passion for history, which he understood as a public service, with the professional duties of a trainee barrister (1865) and was director of the Landed Credit Company of Galicia in Kraków (1885).

Working on the documents for the subsequent diplomatic editions,<sup>3</sup> Piekosiński could not escape from becoming interested in the seals attached to them, which not only constituted the means owing to which a particular legal act was authenticated or the means of various ideological content, but also was an ideal source for genealogy and heraldry. He noticed then that Polish medieval heraldry stands in opposition to western European heraldry, as the division into the heraldic shield (*les partitions*), honourable figures (*pièces honorables*), as well as mobiles (*meubles*)<sup>4</sup> characteristic of European heraldry are exceptionally rare in the Polish coats of arms, while the badges of many of the Polish coats of arms are made of simple line signs.

In the 1870s, Piekosiński came across Karl Oberleitner’s *Die nordischen Runen*, the reading of which drew his attention to the runic alphabet known as futhark used by the Germanic peoples.<sup>5</sup> Publications regularly issued from the beginning of the 1860s devoted to the problem of Slavic runes, where the authors attempted to indicate that due to the Slavic runes texts were written in the Slavic language,<sup>6</sup> must have had an immense influence on the formulation of the main premises of his later conception. Piekosiński noticed similarities between the

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of source editing, heraldry and sigillography, history of Polish law and numismatics was extensively discussed in the special addition to *Kwartalnik Historyczny* (henceforth: KH) 22 (1908): pp. 187–288, also published in book form: *Działalność naukowa Franciszka Piekosińskiego* [Scholarly Achievements of Franciszek Piekosiński], Lwów: Drukarnia Ludowa, 1908.

<sup>2</sup> W. Semkowicz, “Franciszek Piekosiński jako wydawca źródeł” [Franciszek Piekosiński as a Source Publisher] [in:] *Działalność naukowa...* pp. 4–35.

<sup>3</sup> *Diplomata monasterii Clarae Tumbae prope Cracoviam* (Cracoviae: C.K. Towarzystwo Naukowe Krakowskie, 1865); *Codex diplomaticus ecclesiae sancti Wenceslai Cracoviensis*, 2 vols. Cracoviae: Akademia Umiejętności, 1874, 1883; *Codex diplomaticus Poloniae minoris*, 4 vols. Cracoviae: Akademia Umiejętności, 1876, 1886–1887, 1905; *Codex diplomaticus civitatis Cracoviensis*, 4 vols. Cracoviae: Akademia Umiejętności, 1879, 1882.

<sup>4</sup> On the origins of the coat of arms and the systematics of Western European heraldry see: M. Pastoreau, “Le naissance des armoiries,” *Cahiers du Leopard d’Or* 3 (1994): pp. 103–122.

<sup>5</sup> K. Oberleitner, *Die nordischen Runen*, Wien: Karl Haas’sche Buchhandlung, 1848; E.H. Antonsen, *Runes and Germanic Linguistics*, Berlin–New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002, pp. 37–50.

<sup>6</sup> See: K.M. Kowalski, “The Fascination with Runes in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Poland,” [in:] *Roman, Runes and Ogham. Medieval Inscriptions in the Insular World*

oldest distinctive features of the Polish knighthood known from seals and the figures of futhark, enabling him to form a hypothesis that the above-mentioned signs resulted from the Scandinavian runes. He linked their introduction to the territory occupied by the state of the Piast era to the invasion of the Normanised Lechite (Slavic) tribe, which at the turn of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries came from the Elbe River in the drainage basin of the Warta River. The formulation of the afore-mentioned hypothesis became a peculiar *idée fixe* for Piekosiński for almost a quarter-century.<sup>7</sup> Despite trenchant criticism, he defended it, marked with madness, until his death.

In the following article, I will present the main assumptions of the theory, today almost entirely forgotten, by Franciszek Piekosinski on the runic origin of the medieval Polish knighthood, and the most notable opinions of his opponents, which had a considerable influence on its rejection by the academic milieu.

### History

Franciszek Piekosiński propounded his theory for the first time in the dissertation *O powstaniu społeczeństwa polskiego w wiekach średnich i jego pierwotnym ustroju* [On the Origins of Polish Society in the Middle Ages and its Primeval System] published in 1881.<sup>8</sup> After a critical and exhaustive review by Stanisław Smolka<sup>9</sup> was published, he not only did not abandon his earlier claims, but he also defended them in the subsequent studies: *Obrona hipotezy najazdu jako podstawy ustroju społeczeństwa polskiego w wiekach średnich, z uwzględnieniem stosunków Sławian pomorskich i zaodrzańskich* [In support of the Hypothesis of the Invasion as the Origin of the System of the Polish Society in the Middle Ages, with Respect to the Relations of the Slavs of Pomerania and Zaodrze] (1882)<sup>10</sup> and *O dynastycznym pochodzeniu szlachty polskiej* [On the Dynastic Descent of the Polish Nobility] (Kraków, 1888), in which he exploited the most recent findings by the eminent expert in the runic writing, Ludwig F.A. Wimmer, the author of the now-classic dissertation *Die Runen-*

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*and on the Continent*, ed. J. Higgitt, K. Forsyth, D.N. Parsons, Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2001, pp. 134–147.

<sup>7</sup> The state of the research from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was presented in Władysław Semkowicz's article, "Franciszek Piekosiński jako heraldyk i sfragistyk" [Franciszek Piekosiński as a Heraldist and a Sigillography Expert], [in:] *Działalność naukowa...*, pp. 35–68.

<sup>8</sup> In *Rozprawy Akademii Umiejętności. Wydział Historyczno-Filozoficzny* (henceforth: RAUhf) 14 (1881): pp. 85–292.

<sup>9</sup> S. Smolka, "Uwagi o pierwotnem ustroju społecznym Polski piastowskiej z powodu rozpraw pp. Bobrzyńskiego i Piekosińskiego" [Remarks on the Primeval Social System of Poland of the Piast Era as a Result of Mr Bobrzyński's and Piekosinski's Treatises], RAUhf 14 (1881): pp. 293–398, esp. pp. 302–330.

<sup>10</sup> In RAUhf 16 (1883): pp. 1–146.

*schrift*.<sup>11</sup> Wimmer and Sophus Müller, the secretaries of the Royal Association of the Antiquity Experts of the North in Copenhagen, were among a handful of scholars who supported the observations made by Piekosiński. Piekosiński valued their opinions higher than the stance maintained by the Polish historians of the time. He did not even revise his opinion after the publication of polemic speeches by Stosław Łaguna<sup>12</sup> and Antoni Małecki (1890).<sup>13</sup> In 1896, however, he published a revised version of the dissertation *On the Dynastic Descent of the Polish Nobility*, constituting the first volume of the monumental monograph of the Polish knighthood in the Middle Ages,<sup>14</sup> while three years later he put out *Heraldyka polska wieków średnich* [Polish Heraldry of the Middle Ages], where he yet again summarised his hypothesis.<sup>15</sup> In *Herbarz szlachty polskiej wieków średnich* [Armorial of the Polish Nobility of the Middle Ages] (1905), published a year before his death, Piekosiński stated that “the oldest coats of arms of the Polish nobility come from Scandinavian runes, furthermore, the substantial part of those coats of arms, which our nobility to this day make use of, takes its origin from the runic themes, in which only those who do not know Scandinavian runes and have no depiction of them do not believe. Whoever has good eyesight and is able to differentiate between shapes and, in addition, knows Scandinavian runes cannot cast a shadow of doubt that these hundreds of coats of arms whose shapes one can neither understand nor blazon, which western European heraldry knows nothing about, and which, as a result, constitute a characteristic feature of Polish heraldry, are nothing else but twin or further variants of Scandinavian runes.”<sup>16</sup> His adversaries, in turn, were responded to in an exceptionally harsh manner: “I have no interest or any necessity whatsoever to convince those gentlemen [that they are] profoundly mistaken; let them uphold their individual standpoint, if that is what they wish for. For me, their opposition is as innocuous as the support for my theory, expressed by those more serious ones, would be altogether helpful. [...] Naturally, I do not need to turn to the standpoint voiced by the Polish scholars and this I do not attempt to do, but I most strongly insist upon my opinion.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> L.F.A. Wimmer, *Die Runenschrift*, Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1887.

<sup>12</sup> S. Łaguna, “Nowa hipoteza o pochodzeniu szlachty polskiej” [A New Hypothesis on the Origins of the Polish Nobility], KH 4 (1890), pp. 58–92.

<sup>13</sup> A. Małecki, *Studia heraldyczne* [Heraldic Studies], 2 vols., Lwów: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1890.

<sup>14</sup> F. Piekosiński, *Rycerstwo polskie wieków średnich* [The Polish Knighthood in the Middle Ages], vol. 1: *O dynastycznym szlachty polskiej pochodzeniu*, 2nd ed., Kraków: Akademia Umiejętności, 1896.

<sup>15</sup> Kraków: Akademia Umiejętności, 1899, pp. 345–352.

<sup>16</sup> Kraków: Ludwik Anczyc i Spółka, 1905, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 1–2.

### The invasion theory

A similarity which Piekosiński spotted between Scandinavian runes and line signs on the oldest seals of the Polish knighthood, which mainly dated from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, could not, however, constitute conclusive proof regarding the genesis of the latter. For on what grounds can one prove that the badges noted for example on the seals of the Kraków voivodes Marek (1217–1224) and Klemens of Ruszcza (1243–1253), who belonged to the magnate's family of Griffon and played a dominant political role in Małopolska in the first quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>18</sup> constitute a rune transformed to *yr*<sup>19</sup> (*Tab. 1*); while the charge placed on the seal of a different 13<sup>th</sup> century Kraków voivode Piotr (1285–1289), a member of the Bogoria family,<sup>20</sup> is a rune transformed to *lög*<sup>21</sup> (*Tab. 2*)? Of course, there are countless examples. The task appears to be even more arduous if we take into consideration the fact that in the surviving sources referring to the early days of our statehood, traces of any profound influences of Norman culture on Polish society are somewhat difficult to perceive.<sup>22</sup> Piekosiński, searching for arguments justifying his observations, could only, in fact, choose one interpretation, *i.e.* to reject the views of other contemporary historians explicating that the Polish state was formed as a result of a long-lasting evolution of the political system of the tribes living in that territory.<sup>23</sup> He therefore assumed that the invasion of a foreign tribe was not Norman but Lechite (Slavic), which lived “on the frontier of the Slav lands, at the mouth of the Elbe River, in the immediate vicinity of the Danish Normans [...], who took over from their

<sup>18</sup> M.L. Wójcik, *Ród Gryfitów do końca XIII wieku. Pochodzenie – genealogia – rozsiadlenie* [The Family of Griffon until the End of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. Origins – Genealogy – Settlement], Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1993, pp. 41–70.

<sup>19</sup> F. Piekosiński, “Poczet najstarszych pieczęci szlachty polskiej z tematów runicznych” [The Oldest Seals of the Polish Nobility from the Runic Themes] *WNA* 2 (1890): no. 3–4, 17; *idem*, *Pieczęcie polskie wieków średnich*. [Polish Seals of the Middle Ages] I: *Doba piastowska* [Piaśt Era], Kraków: Ludwik Anczyc i Spółka, 1899, no. 48, p. 126.

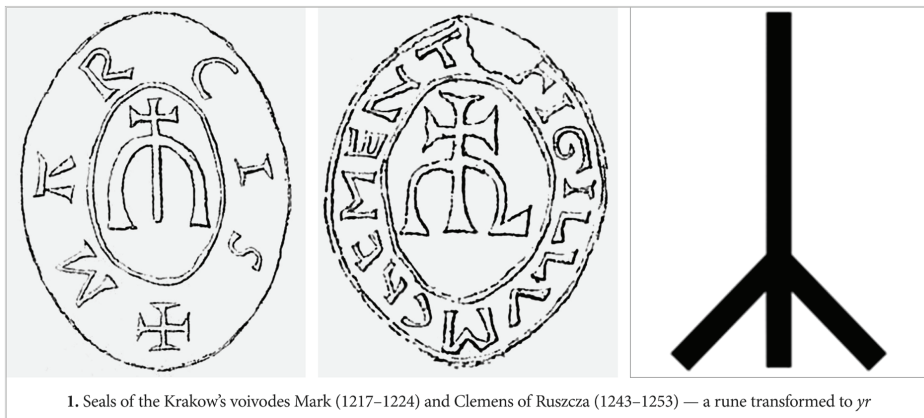
<sup>20</sup> S. Szczur, “Piotr Bogumiłowic (2 poł. XIII w.), wojewoda krakowski” [Piotr Bogumiłowic (2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century), a Krakow Voivode]. [in:] *PSB* 26, pp. 370–71.

<sup>21</sup> F. Piekosiński, “Poczet najstarszych pieczęci...,” no. 25; *idem*, *Pieczęcie polskie...* no. 146.

<sup>22</sup> Unquestionably, Piekosiński was aware of this fact, claiming that, “neither in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, nor in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, nor even in the 11<sup>th</sup> century any traces of a stronger influence of Norman culture on our community have been noticed”, *idem*, “O powstaniu społeczeństwa,” 173. See also: M. Wołoszyn, “Obecność ruska i skandynawska w Polsce od X do XII w. – wybrane problemy” [Ruthenian and Scandinavian Presence in Poland from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> Centuries – Selected Problems], [in:] *Wędrownka i etnogeneza w starożytności i średniowieczu*, ed. M. Salamon, J. Strzelczyk, 2nd ed., Kraków: Historia Iagellonica, 2010, pp. 299–334.

<sup>23</sup> Compare the dispute of Piekosiński with the views expressed in the works of S. Smolka, *Mieszko Stary i jego wiek* [Mieszko Stary and his Epoch] (Warszawa: Gebethner i Wolff, 1881) and M. Bobrzyński, *Dzieje Polski w zarysie* [An Outline History of Poland], 2nd ed. Warszawa: Gebethner i Wolff, 1880, see: Piekosiński, “O powstaniu społeczeństwa...,” pp. 103–12; *idem*, “O dynastycznym szlachty polskiej pochodzeniu...,” pp. 30–37.

neighbours — Normans, to a large extent, their wartime chivalry and other fruits of Scandinavian culture together with the runic signs, which those sovereign princelings used on high shafts and shields as wartime signs (*signa militaria*).<sup>24</sup> The afore-mentioned tribe, fleeing “either from the Saxon army [...] or from the victorious expeditions of Charlemagne against the Slavs,”<sup>25</sup> at the turn of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries moved to the south-east, *i.e.* to the territory between the Oder and Vistula Rivers, subduing the “Lechite tribe, [which was] devoted to farming, cattle and bees breeding, fishing and hunting.”<sup>26</sup> Piekosiński perceived the progenitors of the Polish knight’s families (sign knighthood) both in the senior invader of the Popielid dynasty and the dukes accompanying him, who used their own runic battle signs. Initially, he claimed that there were 20 of them, but later he verified the number to be 38.<sup>27</sup>



1. Seals of the Krakow’s voivodes Mark (1217–1224) and Clemens of Ruszcza (1243–1253) — a rune transformed to yr

Nevertheless, this – in its simplicity – great hypothesis aroused considerable doubts from the moment it was proposed. Above all, there were doubts concerning the so-called invasion, about which source material remained silent, and which did not constitute an original idea of Piekosiński. Forty years earlier, Waclaw Aleksander Maciejowski, a lawyer and an expert in Slavism, held that the Lechites were a higher class in the society of Slavs living on the Elbe River permitted to rule by the Saxons, who came to the drainage basin of the Elbe River from Scandinavia.<sup>28</sup> By the same token, Karol Szajnocha “identified

<sup>24</sup> *Idem*, “O powstaniu społeczeństwa...,” p. 114.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 112.

<sup>27</sup> *Idem*, “O dynastycznym szlachty polskiej pochodzeniu...,” pp. 182–184.

<sup>28</sup> W.A. Maciejowski, *Pierwotne dzieje Polski i Litwy zewnętrzne i wewnętrzne* [Primeval History of Poland and Lithuania – Internal and External], Warszawa: Drukarnia Komissyji Rządowej Sprawiedliwości, 1846, pp. 1–15, esp. pp. 12–13.

Lechites with the Norman invaders,<sup>29</sup> who were to conquer the lands around the Warta River and gave rise to the Polish nobility. The afore-mentioned views were, however, quickly rejected in historiography.<sup>30</sup> Modifying a thread of thinking propounded by Maciejowski,<sup>31</sup> Piekosiński introduced a somewhat mysterious, previously unknown, Slavic tribe (the Lechites from the Elbe River), who, owing to their contacts with the Danes, were influenced by Norman culture (the knowledge of runic writing). The above-mentioned explanation justified the absence of the source notes on that topic, “for they were the Lechites, of the same blood and speech as the subjugated people.”<sup>32</sup> In that way, as Stanisław Smolka put it, “with a single remark he explicates [...] the origins of two divergent social classes in the nation.”<sup>33</sup> The theory on the invasion of the “people from the same tribe,” even in the context of the less than rich knowledge about the origins of the Slavic nation, could not be perceived other than a historic chimera.

Exact dating of the above-mentioned, extremely consequential, event also seemed debatable. Nonetheless, Piekosiński’s deliberations were thoroughly considered. In the group of the oldest coats of arms of the medieval Polish knight-hood, the historian observed runes belonging both to the elder and younger futhark. In the literature on the subject, it is claimed that the elder futhark remained in usage between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the younger one between the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century and the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>34</sup> The 8<sup>th</sup> century has been perceived as the interim period, during which the elder futhark gradually transformed into the younger. The knowledge gained in that way enabled Piekosiński to find a resulting argument supporting his theory. The fact “that in the 8<sup>th</sup> century [...] runes of both futharks, the elder and the younger, could be used simultaneously, and that in the 9<sup>th</sup> century runes of the younger

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<sup>29</sup> K. Szajnocha, *Lechicki początek Polski. Szkic historyczny* [Lechite Origin of Poland. A Historical Sketch], Lwów: Karol Wild, 1858, pp. 308–324.

<sup>30</sup> For a summary of the oldest results of the research see: H. Łowmiański, *Zagadnienie roli Normanów w genezie państw słowiańskich* [An Issue of the Role of Normans in the Genesis of the Slavic Countries], Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1957, pp. 13–34. See also: J. Adamus, *Polska teoria rodowa* [Polish Theory of Kinship], Łódź: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1958, pp. 149–152.

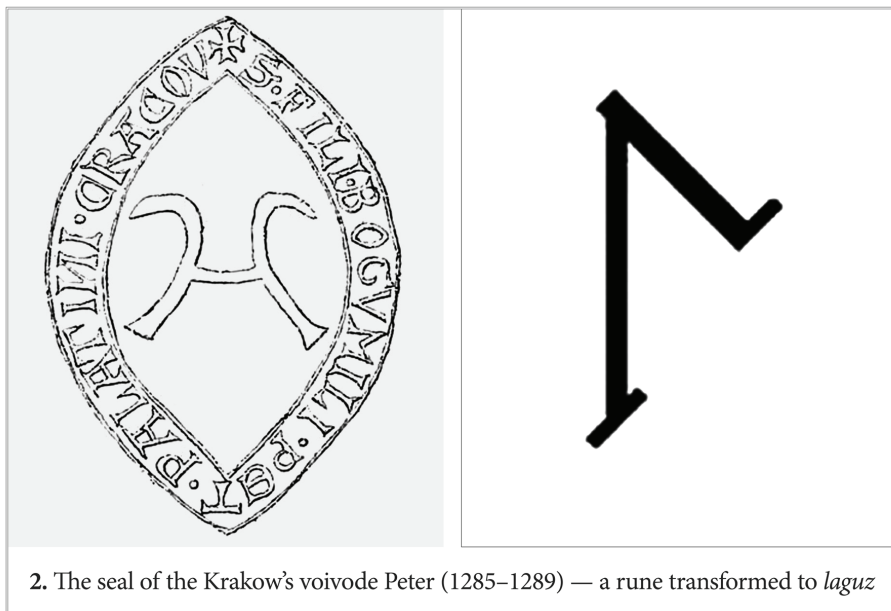
<sup>31</sup> Piekosiński aptly protested that he was not the author of the “invasion or conquest” theory. Not mentioning Maciejowski and Szajnocha, he ascribed it to Bobrzyński and Smolka, who claimed that “in the territory of late Poland of the Piast era numerous tribes remaining under the reign of the sovereign dukes existed originally. Those numerous tribes were conquered by the Piast dynasty, who subsequently established the mighty Piast monarchy,” see: F. Piekosiński, *Herbarz szlachty polskiej...*, pp. 7–8.

<sup>32</sup> S. Smolka, “Uwagi o pierwotnem ustroju...,” p. 303.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>34</sup> W. Krause, *Runen*, 2nd ed. Berlin–New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1993, pp. 14–24; P. Horbowicz, G. Kreutzer, W. Maciejewski, D. Skrzypek, *Runy* [Runes], Warszawa: Wydawnictwo TRIO, 2011, pp. 15–31.

futhark had exclusively come into use, while the runes of the elder one disappeared completely, serves to definitely confirm pertinence of my hypothesis.”<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Piekosiński assumed that the signs used by senior members of particular families did not constitute simple runes but bind runes (*Binderunen*). Their base was the rune *tyr*, which bore a magical meaning and was a symbol of Tyr, the god of war. In the Polish knight’s coats of arms, the author finally identified seven runes of the elder futhark (1. *g*, 2. *eo*, 3. *t*, 4. *e*, 5. *m*, 6. *o*, 7. *d*), six common for both futharks (1. *n/naud*, 2. *p* or *b/bjarkan*, 3. *r* in the elder, *madr* in the younger, 4. *s/sól*, 5. *l/lögr*, and 6. *t/tyr*), as well as two from the younger futhark (1. *hagl*, 2. *ýr*).



2. The seal of the Kraków's voivode Peter (1285–1289) — a rune transformed to *laguz*

It is also worth mentioning that analysing the source material (especially sigillography) of the 13<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries, Piekosiński catalogued signs which, according to him, came from the runic alphabet, but were not runes in their pure form. Even that difficulty Piekosiński managed to overcome in a surprisingly easy way, *i.e.* the researcher assumed that those signs had to undergo modifications that were so strong that they obliterated all the traces of the runic origin!<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> F. Piekosiński, “O dynastycznym szlachty polskiej pochodzeniu...,” p. 108.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 115–116.



### Three phases of rune transformation in the polish coats of arms

The first oldest phase of this transformation (“sanctification”) was linked to the adoption of Christianity in Poland in the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when those pagan symbols that were too firmly set in the iconosphere of the time to be simply removed were “sanctified” by the addition of a cross. It served to prove the somewhat frequent use of numerous variants of that honourable figure (two-and-a-half-barred cross, three-barred cross), deriving from the honourable geometric figures.<sup>37</sup>

The second phase (“chipping”) took place from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. At the time, according to Piekosiński, images of the runes were moved onto high shafts stuck into the ground next to the chieftain’s tent, to which they were originally attached on a banner. The procedure involved breaking a runic sign made of twigs off the shaft. They did not know, however, that this identification battle sign was a rune or a sanctified rune with a well-defined shape. It was unintentionally damaged, *i.e.* chipped, by breaking it off the shaft in an inappropriate place. Piekosiński discerned the effects of the above procedure, among others, in the coats of arms of Jastrzębiec, Mądrostki, Nowina and Szeliga, which lack lower part of the runic stick and which derive from the rune *madr*. The rune *ýr* was chipped in the same manner, from which the researcher derived the coats of arms of Odrowąż, Ogończyk and Pobóg.<sup>38</sup> One of the critics of this hypothesis, Stosław Łaguna, a lawyer, expert in medieval history and a professor at the University in Petersburg, did not reject the possibility that the genesis of the Polish heraldic badges was from the runic alphabet. He argued, however, that the proposed dating for the introduction of the use banners with runic signs was too late, as there is a note that the banners of a pagan tribe called the Lutics had representations of deities (*vexilla*) in the chronicle of Thietmar, the Bishop of Merseburg, from the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>39</sup>

According to Piekosiński, “chipping” was not the final phase in the transformation of the Scandinavian runes in the medieval coats of arms of the Polish knighthood. That extremely significant stage, called “bearing the shape characteristic of the coat of arms”, took place at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and was linked to the introduction of the newest product of Western European knightly culture, *i.e.* coats of arms, particularly in the duchies of the Piast era (*Tab. 3*). On the seals of the members of the ruling dynasty,

<sup>37</sup> J. Szymański, *Herbarz średniowiecznego rycerstwa polskiego* [An Armorial of the Medieval Polish Knighthood], Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1993, pp. 27–33.

<sup>38</sup> F. Piekosiński, “O dynastycznym szlachty polskiej pochodzeniu...,” pp. 118–119.

<sup>39</sup> *Die Chronik des Bishofs Thietmar von Merseburg und ihre Korveier Überarbeitung*, ed. R. Holtzmann, [in:] *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum. Nova Series 9* Berolini: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1935, pp. 302, 477–478; S. Łaguna, “Nowa hipoteza...,” p. 76.

knighthood and, later, the clergy, next to the line signs, representations from the world of flora and fauna, both realistic and fantastic, which were ascribed certain symbolic meanings, began to appear.<sup>40</sup> Piekosiński claimed that shapes of objects found in Western European heraldry was given to those unintelligible, but sanctified by tradition, line signs so that they could be described by means of a blazon.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, the above-mentioned runes *madr* or *ýr* were to be transformed not only into horseshoes or half-crescents but also into “bows or crossbows, animal or hunting horns or birds’ wings.”<sup>42</sup> From those findings, it is known that the rune *madr* gave rise to the coat of arms of Jastrzębiec (the oldest known representation dates from 1319) and Pobóg (the oldest known representation dates from 1396), representing a horseshoe with a cross;<sup>43</sup> Drzewica (the oldest known source note is from 1396) and Szeliga (the oldest known representation dates from 1366), consisting of a half-crescent and a cross;<sup>44</sup> or the coat of arms of Nowina (the oldest known representation is from 1293) built of a kettle-hanger and a cross.<sup>45</sup> From the transformations of the rune *hagl* a Jelita coat of arms was built (the oldest known representation of 1316) representing three tilting-spears mulletwise,<sup>46</sup> etc. Nevertheless, it was noticed quite early that “two-thirds of the signs gathered in the work [of Piekosiński — M.S.] do not belong to the crown nobility, but to the Ruthenian or Lithuanian nobility.”<sup>47</sup> Piekosiński maintained that the coats of arms of the Ruthenian and Lithuanian boyars come directly from the coats of arms of the Polish knighthood, who, after conquering Ruthenia by Kazimierz Wielki in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century began

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<sup>40</sup> Compare the interesting notes of S.K. Kuczyński, “Niektóre zagadnienia symboliki heraldycznej na tle funkcjonowania herbu jako znaku ” [Some Issues of the Heraldic Symbolism Against the Background of the Functioning of the Coat of Arms as a Sign], [in:] *Problemy nauk pomocniczych historii II. Materiały na II konferencję poświęconą naukom pomocniczym historii. Katowice–Wisła, 26–29 V 1973*, Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1973, pp. 29–37.

<sup>41</sup> Extensively see: G.J. Brault, *Early Blazon. Heraldic Terminology in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries with Special Reference to Arthurian Literature*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972, *passim*; Pastoreau, “Le naissance des armoiries,” pp. 103–22.

<sup>42</sup> F. Piekosiński, “O dynastycznym szlachty polskiej pochodzeniu...,” p. 120.

<sup>43</sup> *Idem*, *Pieczęcie polskie...*, no. 319; J. Szymański, *Herbarz średniowiecznego rycerstwa...*, pp. 138–141, 222–224.

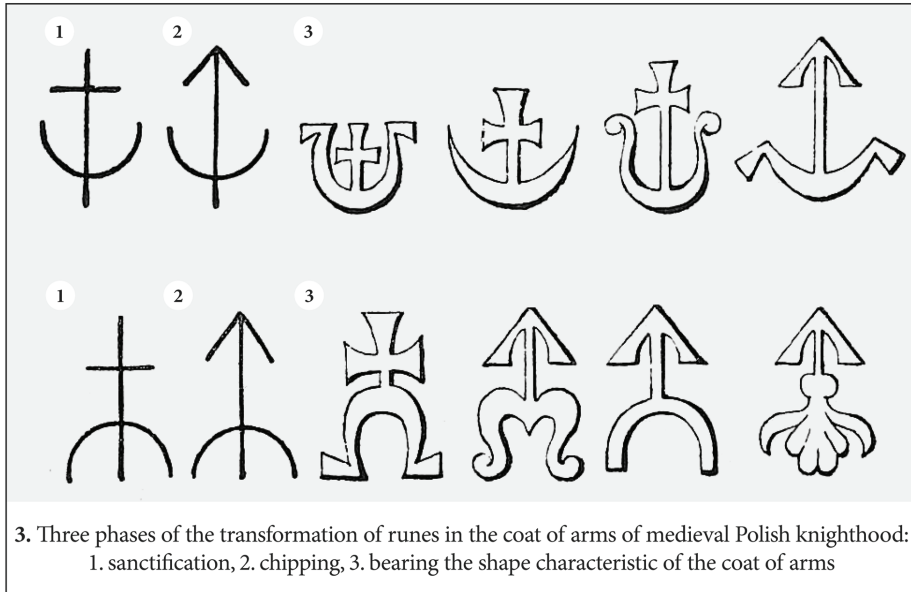
<sup>44</sup> *Inscriptiones clenodiales ex libris iudicialibus palatinatus Cracoviensis*, ed. B. Ulanowski, [in:] *Starodawne Prawa Polskiego Pomniki 7*, Cracoviae: Akademia Umiejętności, 1885, no. 1342; A. Małecki, *Studia 2...*, p. 136; F. Piekosiński, *Pieczęcie polskie...*, no. 520; J. Szymański, *Herbarz średniowiecznego rycerstwa...*, pp. 119–120, 268.

<sup>45</sup> A. Małecki, *Studia 2...*, 132; J. Szymański, *Herbarz średniowiecznego rycerstwa...*, pp. 200–01.

<sup>46</sup> A. Małecki, *Studia 2...*, 132; J. Szymański, *Herbarz średniowiecznego rycerstwa...*, pp. 143–145.

<sup>47</sup> S. Łaguna, “Nowa hipoteza...,” p. 84.

colonising the area.<sup>48</sup> The above-mentioned claim was scornfully dismissed by Aleksander Jabłonowski, a distinguished expert on the history of Ruthenia, who connected the introduction of the runic alphabet in Ruthenia with the succession of the Scandinavian dynasty to the throne. In turn, he regarded Ruthenian heraldry as a natural creation, shaped by various elements, and not only runic ones.<sup>49</sup> The polemics between Jabłonowski and Piekosiński did not result in the change of the viewpoint of the latter whatsoever.<sup>50</sup>



### Runes vs. House marks

In formulating his pyramidal hypothesis and submitting subsequent arguments substantiating it, Piekosiński needed to explicate why the oldest coats of arms of the Polish knighthood could not have been derived from the so-called house marks (*Hausmarke*), *i.e.* simple line signs that were commonly used in

<sup>48</sup> F. Piekosiński, “O źródłach heraldyki ruskiej” [On the Sources of Ruthenian Heraldry], *RAUhf*, Serya II, 38 (1899): pp. 185–204; *idem*, “Les sources de l’heraldique ruthène,” *Bulletin de l’Académie des Sciences de Cracovie* Avril (1899): pp. 165–168.

<sup>49</sup> A. Jabłonowski, “Najnowsze teorie heraldyczne pochodzenia polskiego społeczeństwa szlacheckiego ze stanowiska etnograficznego” [The Recent Heraldic Theories of the Origin of the Polish Nobility from the Ethnographic Perspective], *Wisła* 5 (1891): pp. 104–137; *idem*, “W sprawie średniowiecznej heraldyki litewsko-ruskiej,” [On Medieval Lithuanian-Russian Heraldry] *KH* 12 (1898): pp. 553–559.

<sup>50</sup> A polemic presented by W. Semkowicz, “Franciszek Piekosiński jako heraldyk...,” pp. 47–50.

the pre-heraldic period as marks of ownership that could be found in an area ranging from “Scandinavian countries and Great Britain, the Netherlands, all of Germany to Tirol, Switzerland or the German settlements in Piedmont.”<sup>51</sup> Piekosiński held that they were to come from the runic alphabet since a man would not mark his property “entirely senselessly” by virtue of signs that were “meaningless and unintelligible.”<sup>52</sup> In an outstanding dissertation entitled *Die Haus- und Hofmarken*,<sup>53</sup> Carl Gustav Homeyer proved beyond a shadow of doubt that not only were the house marks hereditary, but they also underwent modifications linked to the families’ reproductiveness. Therefore, it was a process identical to the formation of the variants of the “Polish coats of arms from runic themes from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries until the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>54</sup> Piekosiński rejected the possibility that the military signs of the Polish knighthood could derive from house marks, as in the Germanic tribes they were used “exclusively in the lower social classes, *i.e.* bourgeoisie [merchants and craftsmen – M.S.] and peasantry,”<sup>55</sup> and their use was restricted to the private and legal sphere. In contrast, in the Polish lands, runic signs were used “exclusively by the highest social class, *i.e.* the nobility”<sup>56</sup> and were never used “to mark one’s own property. Those two fundamental differences [...] abruptly dismiss speculation that runic signs in the coats of arms of the Polish gentry discernible by means of house marks arrived from Germany to Poland.”<sup>57</sup> He pondered whether Scandinavian runes “before they reached the top of the high shaft to serve there as military signs were used by those dynasties, forefathers of the Polish nobility, as court and house marks.”<sup>58</sup> Accordingly, Piekosiński reached the conclusion that the afore-mentioned tribe inhabiting the area near the Elbe River, who at the turn of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries were to have invaded the territory of modern Wielkopolska, “bordering in the north by the Danish Normans, and in the south by Germanic peoples,”<sup>59</sup> borrowed from those Germanic people the custom of using house marks to mark property, but these were most likely not derived from the runic alphabet, since the runes they introduced to the house marks were borrowed from Danish Normans (single runes). Moreover, it was not until later that they began to use those runes as military signs (bind

<sup>51</sup> F. Piekosiński, “O dynastycznym szlachty polskiej pochodzeniu...,” p. 130.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 132–133. Concerning the issue of the origins of the house marks, Piekosiński expressed his views in his polemics on the theses proposed by A. Małecki, see: “Najnowsze poglądy na wytworzenie się szlachty polskiej w wiekach średnich,” [The Newest Views on the Origins of the Polish Nobility in the Middle Ages] KH 4 (1890): pp. 726–729.

<sup>53</sup> Berlin: Verlag der Königlichen Geheimen Ober Hofbuchdruckerei, 1870.

<sup>54</sup> F. Piekosiński, “O dynastycznym szlachty polskiej pochodzeniu,” p. 132.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 133.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 134.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*.

runes). It is somewhat difficult to cite a finer example illustrating a method of the research of Piekosiński, who juggled arguments in such a manner that those that could disprove his hypothesis, in fact, confirmed it.

### Conclusion

It is not without reason that the runic theory of Franciszek Piekosiński was considered to be “one of the most daring and most precisely examined” theories in the history of Polish historiography.<sup>60</sup> The author himself treated his ponderings almost as if they were dogma, consistently rejecting even the gentlest critical remarks. At the same time, he filed complaints with the “scholarly Polish world”, accusing them of incomprehension, stating that “there are some scholars whose sight is excellent, who can differentiate between shapes, and could be easily persuaded about the appearance of Scandinavian, and despite all that, with persistence worth the cause, they refute my runic theory even if they are unable to bring themselves to advance a theory that could explicate those hundreds of mysterious Polish coats of arms.”<sup>61</sup>

Today, almost 110 years after his death, it is justifiable to pose a question if and to what extent he was close to solving a puzzle of the genesis of Polish heraldry.

It is widely realised that a coat of arms constitutes one of the types of signs (ideograms) created by men and received by means of the senses: a sign that is to evoke an image of an object different than the object itself.<sup>62</sup> Among various meanings transmitted by virtue of a sign, one may enumerate social and legal content. Such messages were conveyed by the identification and property signs. Contrastingly, coats of arms were from the very beginning exclusively subordinated to the defined regulations of heraldry. At first in Poland, they functioned as military identification signs, and with time they became signs of state affiliation. Before Western European heraldic symbolism reached the territories of the separate Piast duchies, the local knighthood used line identification signs, the creation of which was connected, above all, to the needs of the individual and were used to determine his property.<sup>63</sup>

The above line signs were characteristic of the various civilisations, the fact of which escaped Piekosiński’s attention.<sup>64</sup> The similarities he perceived between

<sup>60</sup> S. Łaguna, “Nowa hipoteza...,” p. 59.

<sup>61</sup> F. Piekosiński, “Herbarz szlachty polskiej...,” p. 1.

<sup>62</sup> Extensively see: J. Kotarbińska, “Pojęcie znaku” [A Notion of Sign], *Studia Logica* 6 (1957): pp. 60–63, 101–104; U. Eco, *Le signe. Histoire et analyse d’un concept*, Bruxelles: Editions Labor, 1988, pp. 27–38.

<sup>63</sup> S.K. Kuczyński, “Niektóre zagadnienia symboliki heraldycznej...,” p. 34.

<sup>64</sup> Compare the valuable contribution of S. Kutrzeba, “Przyczynki do teorii runicznej” [Contributions to the Runic Theory], *Miesięcznik Heraldyczny* 2 (1909): pp. 1–3 (there, among others, are pictures of horse’s pasterns burned by the Caboclos from South America).

signs used by the Polish knighthood and Scandinavian runes were contingent upon the fact that both the inhabitants of Scandinavia and the Piast state, linked the same geometric elements and created signs with certain similar features, regardless of the other group. It cannot be excluded, however, that the genesis of the afore-mentioned line signs, originally bearing magical meanings, should be searched for in the observation of the sky (constellations), since Jan Długosz, the author of the greatest historiographic work in medieval Europe, in presenting in the first half of the 15th century the coat of arms of Awdaniec did not decipher the shape of the badge (the letter W) from the turned rune *e*, but from the constellation of Cassiopeia.<sup>65</sup> It needs to be kept in mind that the Latin noun *signum* denotes not only a military sign, but also a constellation (and that is how it was construed in ancient Rome).<sup>66</sup> Unquestionably, this issue requires further comparative studies.

In deriving Polish coats of arms of the nobility from Scandinavian runes, Piekosiński intentionally intertwined their genesis with the invasion of a Normanised Slavic tribe, who conquered the peoples living in the drainage basin of the Warta River. Solely in connection with the facts mentioned above, that hypothesis seems plausible. It is a pity that Piekosiński did not devote greater attention to the arrival described by Gallus Anonymus to Poland of 500 German knights — who later constituted the major part of the duke's army — in 1040 together with Kazimierz Odnowiciel, coming back from the exile.<sup>67</sup> There is every likelihood that we should associate with that event the introduction of the battle identification signs in the territory of Poland, characteristic of broadly defined German culture, built of various combinations of lines and whose usage was limited to the knighthood, given that the representatives of the elite of dignitaries did not make use of it earlier.

The pioneering results of the research of Franciszek Piekosiński in the field of heraldry and sigillography have not been completely dismissed and forgotten.

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<sup>65</sup> *Joannis Dlugossii Annales seu Cronicae incliti Regni Poloniae*, lib. IV, Varsaviae: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1969, p. 309. See also: R. Kiersnowski, "Niebo nad Polską średniowieczną" [The Sky over Medieval Poland], [in:] *Wyobraźnia średniowieczna*, ed. T. Michałowska, Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 1996, p. 51; E. Snieżyńska-Stolot, "Zwierzęta na nagrobku Władysława Jagiełły, czyli jeszcze raz o ikonografii astrologicznej w średniowieczu" [Animals on the Tombstone of Władysław Jagiełło, Once More on the Astrological Iconography in the Middle Ages], [in:] *Artifex doctus. Studia ofiarowane profesorowi Jerzemu Gadomskiemu w siedemdziesiątą rocznicę urodzin*, vol. 1, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2007, p. 110.

<sup>66</sup> *Słownik łacińsko-polski* [Polish-Latin Dictionary], ed. M. Plezia, vol. 5, Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1979, p. 147.

<sup>67</sup> *Galli Anonymi Cronicae et gesta ducum sive principum Polonorum*, ed. C. Maleczyński, [in:] *Monumenta Poloniae Historica. Nova Series 2* Cracoviae: Polska Akademia Umiejętności, 1952, I.18; see also: T. Jurek, "Geneza szlachty polskiej" [The Origins of the Polish Nobility], [in:] *Ślechta, moc a reprezentance ve strédověku*, Praha: Filosofia, 2007, pp. 1–78, esp. 4–12 (contains a summary of the research to date).

Published in 1899 with the help of Edmund Diehl, a catalogue of nearly 600 of the oldest Polish seals has, despite many shortcomings, been until now the only and the biggest publication of that type. While examining the heraldic and sphragistic oeuvre of Franciszek Piekosiński, Władysław Semkowicz stressed in 1908 that Piekosiński's publication "will remain inestimable scientific treasure for the younger generations of scholars."<sup>68</sup> And it has remained so for more than a hundred years now.

Translated by Joanna Szczepańska-Włoch

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Streszczenie

#### SKANDYNAWSKIE RUNY A POCHODZENIE HERBÓW RYCERSTWA POLSKIEGO: TEORIA RUNICZNA FRANCISZKA PIEKOSIŃSKIEGO

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przypomnienie szerszemu gronu czytelników oraz krytyczne omówienie głównych założeń teorii o runicznym pochodzeniu herbów rycerstwa polskiego, stworzonej w końcu XIX stulecia przez znakomitego polskiego mediewistę, Franciszka Piekosińskiego (1844–1906), nie bez powodu określanej mianem „jednej z najsmielej pomyślanych i arcymisternie przeprowadzonych”. Teoria ta powstała niejako na marginesie badań prowadzonych przez tego autora nad najstarszymi pieczęciami rycerstwa polskiego. Dostrzegłszy podobieństwo zachodzące pomiędzy umieszczanymi na nich przedheraldycznymi znakami kreskowymi a figurami futharku, czyli alfabetu runicznego, zbudował on wielowarstwową, fantastyczną hipotezę, wedle założeń której herby średniowiecznego rycerstwa polskiego wykształciły się właśnie ze skandynawskich run przyniesionych na ziemię polską na przełomie VIII i IX w. przez przedstawicieli obcego, znormanizowanego lechickiego (słowiańskiego) szczepu, którzy dokonali na nie najazdu. Godła w herbach rodzimego rycerstwa, do czasu pojawienia się na ziemiach polskich herbów zachodnioeuropejskich, miały zaś przejść trzy fazy przekształceń, nie raz zupełnie zacierających ich runiczny charakter: fazę 1. „uświęcania” w drugiej połowie X w., kiedy do owych pogańskich symboli dodano krzyż; fazę 2. „uszczerbiania” między XI a XIII stuleciem, kiedy wizerunki run zaczęto przenosić z drzewców (stannic) wbijanych w ziemię przy namiocie wodza na chorągwie; oraz fazę 3. „uherbiania” w końcu XIII oraz w XIV stuleciu w związku z recepcją w poszczególnych księstwach piastowskich najnowszego wówczas wytworu zachodnioeuropejskiej kultury rycerskiej, jakim były herby. Autor prezentowanego studium zreferował również główne zarzuty wysuwane przez adwersarzy Piekosińskiego, które doprowadziły w efekcie do zanegowania tytułowej hipotezy przez środowisko naukowe. Pokazał ponadto, że jej twórca, mimo druzgocących głosów krytyki, bronił własnych pomysłów aż do naznaczonej obłędem śmierci.

<sup>68</sup> W. Semkowicz, „Franciszek Piekosiński jako heraldyk...,” p. 68. See also: S.K. Kuczyński, „Początki polskich badań sfragistycznych na tle europejskim” [The Origins of the Research over Sigillography against the European Background], [in:] *Pieczęcie w dawnej Rzeczypospolitej. Stan i perspektywy badań*, ed. Z. Piech, J. Pakulski, J. Wroniszewski, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo DiG, 2006, pp. 25–29.

