



The target of St Adalbert mission and the place of his martyrdom. A new hypothesis.

Leszek Pawel Slupecki

St Adalbert (better known under his Slavic name Wojciech) is [fig.1] first patron saint of Poland¹. Contrary to other national patron saints of Central and Northern Europe St Adalbert was not, however, a member of dynasty ruling the country. At that time almost every dynasty in newly converted countries (including Polish Piasts) tried to have own patron saint and a best person was in every case a member of ruling dynasty - very good example here is Norwegian St Olaf. But in Poland the situation developed in a bit different way; it happened partly because of political events but partly because St Adalbert substituted a royal dynasty member as a patron saint.

To explain how it happened is necessary to say some words about political background of St Adalbert's martyrdom. After Mieszko I (first Polish ruler recorded in written sources) died in 992 his son Boleslav became to be his successor in the country. Poland, converted in 966, since 968 had own bishop. How the first Polish bishopric was organized is under discussion. But for ambitious Boleslav who obviously wanted to be a king just one bishopric was not enough. He needed for himself a royal crown and an archbishopric for the country. He aimed at this in close cooperation with Otto III, very young German King and from 996 Roman Emperor who was his most important ally. From the other hand his main enemy (beside of pagan Lutitians and Pruthenians) was at that time Czech ruler Boleslav II from the dynasty of Premyslids. The fact that both Slavic princes: Polish Boleslav and Czech Boleslavs had the same name was not accidental as Polish Boleslavs mother was from Premyslids dynasty. This Czech ruling dynasty had however problems at home with competing family of Slavikovicz ruling in the town of Libice in eastern Bohemia. About 982 because of efforts to reconcile hostile families Adalbert, son of Slavnik, became to be a bishop of Prague. He was however some years later expelled from his seat and his Czech diocese. Lives of St Adalbert stress that it happened because he was as a priest very serious in religious and moral matters. But it is necessary not to forget that Prague was a capital town of the family very hostile to his own.

Bishop of Prague and future saint went also to Rome where he was well accepted among monastic intellectuals. It is necessary to add here that before Adalbert became to be a bishop he received in Magdeburg a very good education in Othric's cathedral school. After he spend some years in Rome and Italy (including Monte Cassino) the Pope John XV - because of Willigis who was Adalbert's superior as archbishop of Mainz - force Adalbert to come back to Prague. Possibly competing families tried again to establish peace. But already at the beginning of 995 Adalbert escape from Prague and went back to Italy and Rome. At that time he meets for first time with Otto III. In Rome Adalbert refuse to come back to Prague and traveled to France to Tours and to Paris. Finally he comes to Emperor's Otto III court in Mainz. Here he became to be a close friend of the Emperor. Vita prior suggest, that the friendship was so close that it even cause tales about its homosexual background².

At the same time the conflict between Premyslids and Slavnicovicz finds in Bohemia tragic end. At 27th September 995 Premyslids conquered the town Libice and killed all members of Slavnikovicz dynasty they found in the city including five Adalbert's brothers³. After it happened Pope Gregory no more insist on Adalbert to come-back to Prague and allow him to abandon his seat but under condition that he come to pagans as a missionary. Adalbert decide also to go to Gniezno to Polish prince Boleslav. What should be stress here: In that way Adalbert decide to go to close ally of his own family and an ally of Emperor. Both were enemies of Premyslids. What's more - some territories in southern Poland (conquered about 990 in cost of Premyslids) still belong to bishopric of Prague - so under Boleslav's rule Adalbert could execute his bishops power at least over some part of his own bishopric.

Adalbert, however, went to pagan Pruthenians to preach gospel. But his efforts comes in vain and he was killed as a martyr at 23 April 997. Polish prince Boleslav ransom the corps of martyr for a big money (the Lives tells about a gold of weight equal to this of martyr's corps), and transport the relics to his capital town Gniezno. Soon after in Rome the Pope declare Adalbert as a Saint and his brother Gaudentius appears on one Otto's III charter from 2 December 999 as *archiepiscopus Sancti Adalberti* which is a proof that it was already decided to create in Gniezno an archbishopric⁴. It happened formally in year 1000 when on so called council of Gniezno, in presence of Emperor Otto III, the Polish archbishopric was established over Saints Adalbert's shrine. On the same council of Gniezno Emperor Otto III gives Boleslav royal rights and insignia (St Maurice spear which is a 10th century copy of German Heilige Lanze) and put him a crown on the head. Was it an formal royal coronation of Boleslaw or not is under discussion⁵.

What is interesting, the cult of St Adalbert is in Polish historiography much better investigated as his life⁶. It is astonishing because Adalbert's curriculum vitae is well documented by contemporary Latin

sources⁷. [fig. 2] This ecclesiastical sources create, as is usually the case, a picture of a perfect saint. In consequence Adalberts biography extracted uncritically from his first two Lives (as some Polish historians of confessional links use to do) looks as follows: Adalbert was perfectly saint already in the school. As a bishop of Prague was expelled twice from his seat because nobody will follow there his moral instructions. Free of his bishops duties Adalbert wished to die as a martyr among pagans. However, when he went to Polish prince Boleslav he send him in a improvised way to pagans in Prussia with a hope that they produce from living Adalbert a dead but holy corpse delivering him relics absolutely necessary to create an archbishopric and organize a council of Gniezno. And in that way a crazy missionary went to Prussia send there by Machiavellian ruler. Adalbert landed in Prussia in an accidental spot, an accidental person brings him to a small village, where he tried to convert some accidental peasants on local market, and – expelled from that spot – finally died on his escape back to Gniezno when a band of pagans attacked him in fury. Pagans did their job. Boleslav buy the holy corpse and established over Adalberts' relics an archbishopric in Gniezno.

Such reconstruction of events is an absurd. No serious ruler – and Boleslav was an absolutely serious and reasonable ruler - may send in an improvised way his eminent guest to dangerous place just to risk his life for own benefits. And especially not in case when the guest originated from an allied family, belonged to the top of ecclesiastical elite of Europe and was a close friend of Emperor! From the other hand Adalbert, although obviously inclined to mysticism and monastic life, was not a crazy *episcopus vagans* but an absolutely serious prince of the church and a member of originally Czech powerful family deeply involved in Central European political games. I suppose that Adalberts enthusiasm - expressed in his Lives - to go to pagans and die as a martyr belong, like many other details, to literary genre of *Vitae Sanctorum*. As a saint he simply should be like that. In reality he wanted rather to fulfill his mission well, it means convert pagans successfully and subordinate them to Boleslav.

It means St Adalberts mission was a serious political adventure. As such it must have been well prepared and had a target of value great enough to be worth work of emperors friend and Boleslavs emissary. Such a mission was also not directed to an accidental place somewhere in Prussia. I agree with Gerard Labuda that only place in that region worth to be a target for St Adalberts mission was Truso⁸, an important port of trade in Vistula estuary - a very interesting place for Boleslav building his kingdom. The name of the place of St Adalberts mission was in his Lives not recorded (to the question why I turn later on) Adalberts Lives however clearly stress that it was a town with a market⁹. We should remember here that serious missions of that time were directed usually to three kinds of places: Firstly – to royal courts, secondly – to important assembly places, thirdly – to most important ports of trade. Every such place gives missionaries a chance for success and – at the same time – almost a grantee of security.

St Adalberts mission must have been also well prepared. It is true that between his arrival to Poland in late 996/beginning 997 and the start of the mission in early spring 997 (as St Adalbert died at 23 April 997) was not much time. But about planned mission Boleslav and Adalbert (and possibly even Otto III as well), could decide earlier when Adalbert was on Emperors court. The lives testify that the transport for the mission (boats with crew and warriors) was ready in proper time. What is most important the mission was also politically prepared. The Lives testify an important role of a local leader described as *dominus villae* who received Adalbert in Pruthenian market town and introduce missionary to the assembly held there¹⁰.

It seems also that the mission was at the beginning in some way similar to St Ansgar mission to Birka¹¹. The target was a trading place controlled by an assembly but the important role played there a single person. This *dominus villae* by means of diplomacy was persuaded to help missionaries. Only the end of the mission was absolutely different. In Birka the assembly allowed missionaries to preach Christianity, in Truso the assembly expelled Adalbert and his two fellows (his brother Gaudentius and Polish guide Bogusza) from the town. By this occasion the local protector of missionaries, much probably the over mentioned *dominus villae*¹², get in trouble as the assembly, because of missionaries, threatened him to be banished. So local protector of mission, trying to save his own ass, must abandon missionaries as quick as possible. They, however, had no boat (as the boat with Polish crew bring them in the night in secret and disappeared¹³) and missionaries were force to go back to Gniezno by walking along Vistula river. [fig.3].

In one of St Adalberts Lives appears however an episode depicting the Saint on his escape at the sea side¹⁴. The episode is frequently used as an argument that the places of Adalberts mission and martyrdom were located deep in Prussia far away from Vistula estuary - somewhere on Samia peninsula. Such theory is for me not convincing, as the episode belong to the sequence of dreams and supernatural visions predicting Adalberts *martyrium* and appears after prophetic vision and before description of dream of similar kind¹⁵.

So Adalberts way back to Gniezno leads in my opinion along Vistula river [fig.4]. But why the research has so much trouble with Adalberts itinerary in Prussia and identification of places of his mission and martyrdom?¹⁶ We have two his Lives absolutely contemporary to the events, one (*Vita prior*) written two years after martyrdom, and the other (*Vita altera* of Brun of Querfurt) seven years after Adalberts death! It is

because both these lives are of foreign origins and, especially Vita prior written by John Canaparius in Rome is locating the events according to a very special geography (Vita altera follows Vita prior with some variations). Vita prior begins with such a picture of Slavic lands: *Est locus in partibus Germaniae (...) quem incolae Sclavoniam cognomine dicunt*. It wrote a Roman citizen, Roman citizen of late tenth century, but still a Roman. We should also translate his words in following way. "On the edge of very barbarian land of Germany there is an even most barbarian spot called the land of Slavs". Following such a picture of the world Canaparius, writing Adalbert's story brings a plenty of place names from Italy, some but few from Germany and just two from Poland (namely Gniezno and Gdansk). From pagan Prussia he has no one place name. But it was a region totally outside of the limes of Christian world! The place names were obviously accessible. Both Adalbert's fellows went back from the mission alive and, in addition, by paying a ransom to pagans for Saint's corps somebody must go to the place of his martyrdom. Another point is that the Prussian actors of events have also no personal names (with one very interesting exception) and are depicted like "pagan", "*dominus ville*" etc. But here is a more common strategy of *damnatio memoriae* at work.

We have however another source, an extract from lost Polish Life of St Adalbert (*Passio S. Adalberti*), an extract made in late 11th century and published as *Passio* from Tegernsee¹⁷. In this source, which is very short and very badly preserved, appears a name of the spot where St Adalbert finds his martyr death. The place name is recorded as *Cholinum*¹⁸ and no convincing Prussian or Baltic etymology was proposed to explain the meaning and location of this place-name. After a small paleographical emendation, however, the name became to be absolutely clear as a Slavic place-name *Cholm* which means a "mount". What's more on the road back from Truso to Gniezno along Vistula river there is, in old borderland between Slavic and Baltic realms an very old town called in Old Polish Cholm (recorded in Germanized version as Kulm), today well known as Chelmno.

I suppose that Cholm was a place of St Adalbert's martyrdom. What's interesting, up till now we have completely no idea where Adalbert's martyrdom took place although on Boleslav's court at the beginning of 11th century obviously everybody knows it. Adalbert's fellows and witness of his death come back alive, some people transport Adalbert's corps from the place of his martyrdom to Gniezno, where he was buried in the cathedral's shrine. But when the first Piast monarchy collapse, soon after Boleslav's death, St Adalbert's corpse was transferred to Prague when Czech prince Bretislav plundered Poland sunk into chaos of pagan revolt. After years of disorder when the Polish monarchy was reborn at the end of 11th century a new St Adalbert's corpse was found in Gniezno and transferred to the cathedral. In that way existed two absolutely authentic corpses of the Saint, one his arm (which Otto III received in Gniezno for St Maurice's spear), and one additional head and finger¹⁹. But in time of chaos about the middle of the 11th century the knowledge about the place of Adalbert's martyrdom was totally forgotten.

There is an archaeological argument for my supposition. [Fig.5] Very close to the old town of Cholm archaeological excavations discovered very clear traces of a large basilica from early eleventh century. The building was never finished as in thirties or forties of 11th century the construction works were stop and the not finished building was abandoned²⁰. About this basilica there is no single word in written sources and the object up to the time of excavations was absolutely unknown! Basilica was located in a stronghold. Outside of the stronghold, there was also a big cemetery of 11th century discovered. The stronghold with basilica, one of very few like that in Poland, do not fit well to the net of strategic Polish strongholds of Boleslav's time. It may be however interpreted as a church commemorating the place of St Adalbert's martyrdom, and, at the same time, a center for future mission under construction. Pagan revolt in Poland finished this project and erased the memory about the place of Adalbert's martyrdom.



Fig.1 – St Adalbert as a martyr on place of his martyrdom with cut head put on the stock and the corpse ready for transport (detail from the 12th century bronze Gate of Gniezno cathedral)



Fig.2 – The Life of St Adalbert as represented on Bronze Gate of Gniezno Cathedral, 12th century (after Europas Mitte um 1000. Katalog, A.Wieczorek, H.-M.Hinz eds., Stuttgart 2000, p.533.

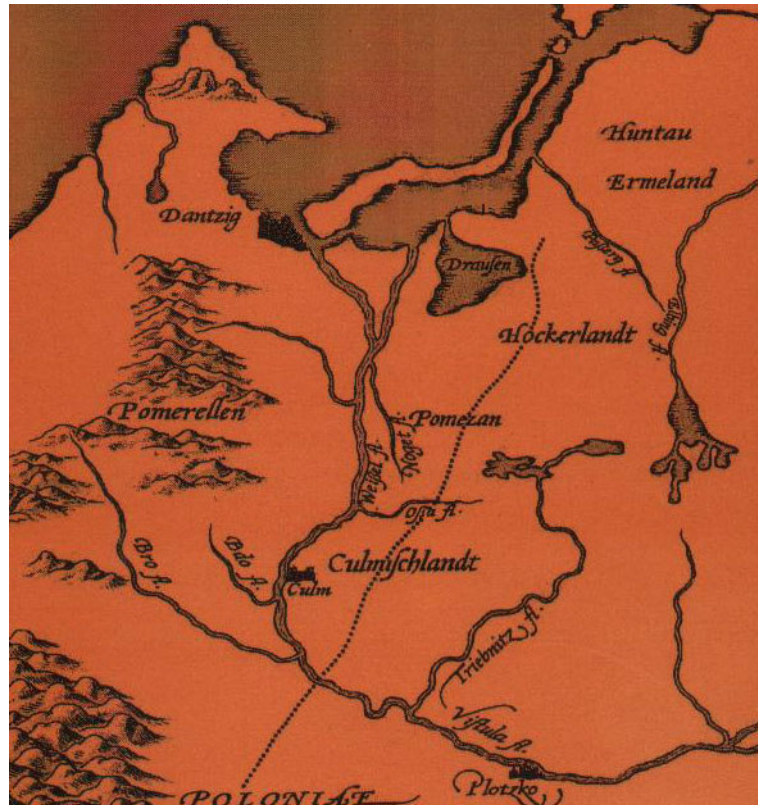


Fig.3 – An old map of Vistula estuary (after W.Chudziak ed., *Wczesnośredniowieczny szlak lądowy z Kujaw do Prus (XI wiek)*, Toruń 1997), cover.

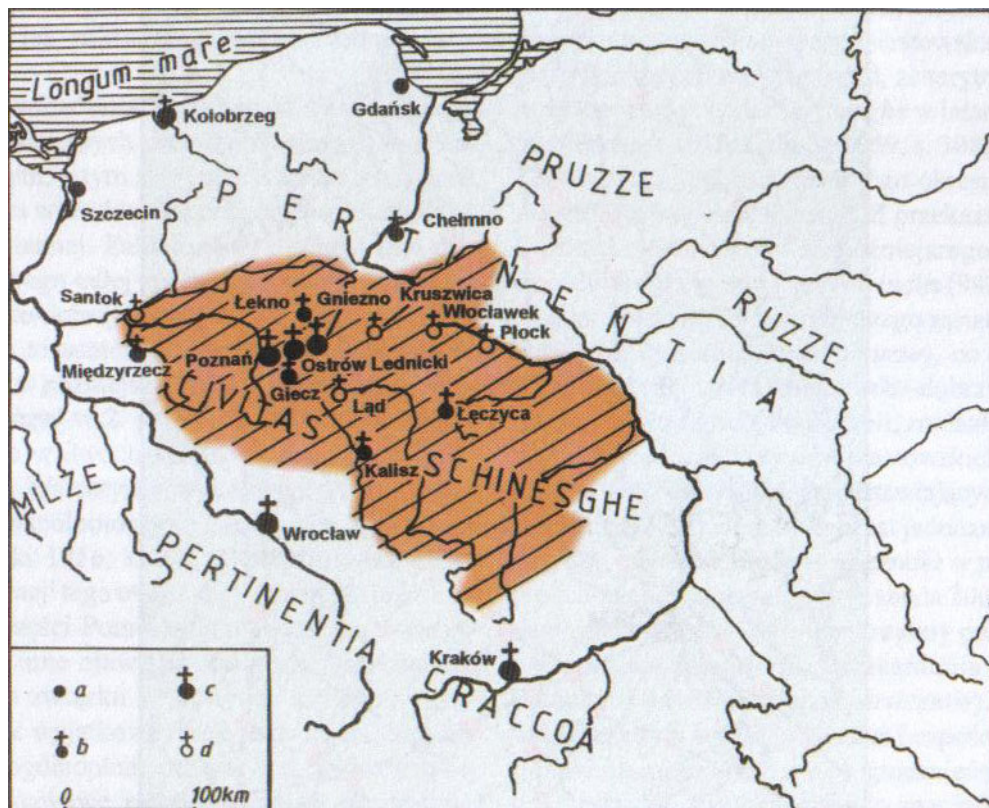
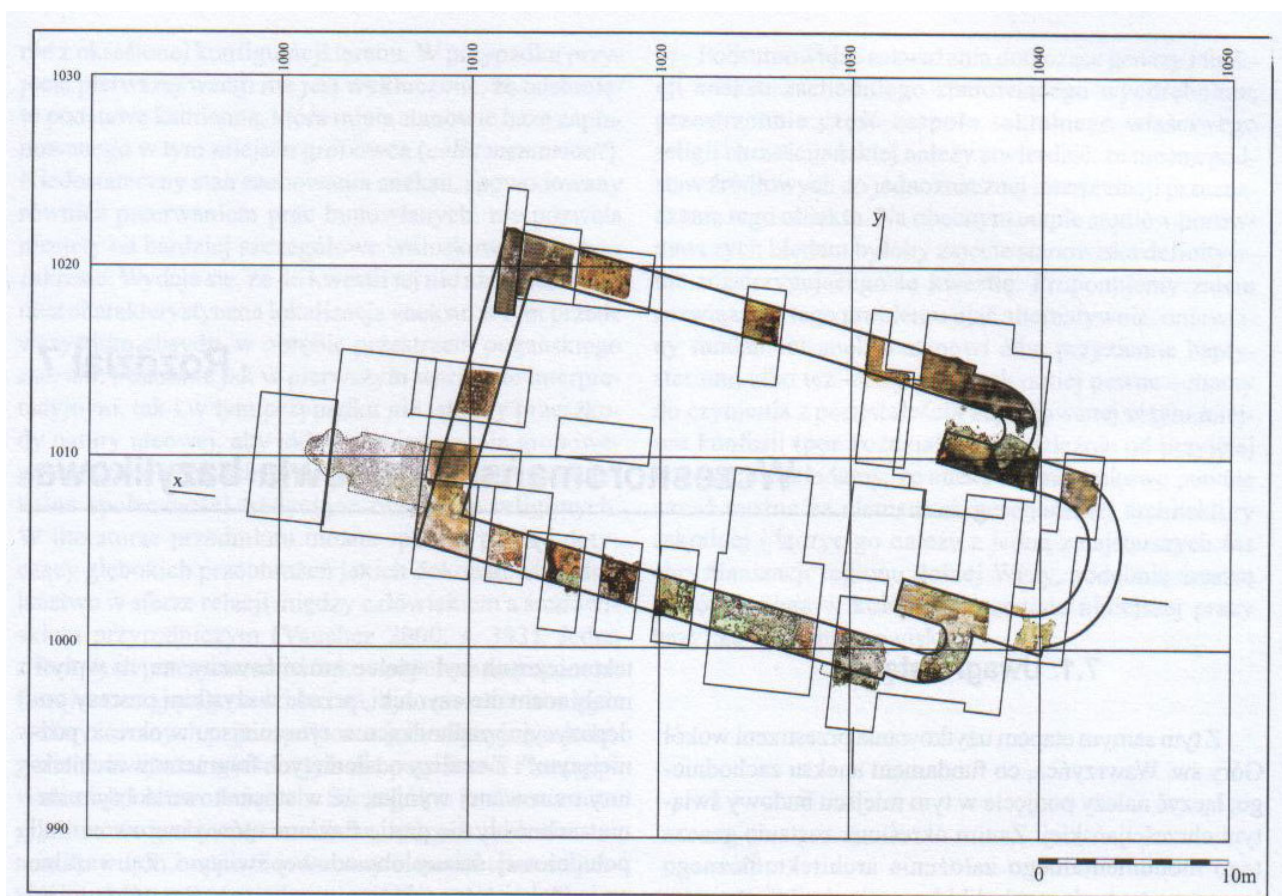


Fig.4 – A map of most important early centers of Christian religion in Poland, after Z.Kurnatowska, *Die Christianisierung Polens im Lichte der archaologischen Quellen*, in: *Europas Mitte um Jahr 1000*, Band 1, Stuttgart 2000, p.490.



Ryc. 29. Kaldus, woj. kujawsko-pomorskie, stanowisko 3. Planigrafia relikwów archeologiczno-architektonicznych bazyliki
Fig. 29. Kaldus, Kujavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship, area 3. Plan of the architectural and archaeological remains of the basilica

Fig.5 – The plan of archaeological and architectural remains of the basilica discovered in Kaldus by Chelmno, after W.Chudziak, *Wczesnośredniowieczna przestrzeń sakralna...*, p.78.

¹ The best modern biography of St Adalbert-Wojciech brings: G.Labuda, *Święty Wojciech. Biskup-męczennik, patron Polski, Czech i Węgier*, Wrocław 2004; cf. much older book of: H.G.Voigt, *Adalbert von Prag. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Kirche und des Mönchtums im zehnten Jahrhundert*, Berlin 1898. About sources for St Adalbert's life see especially J.Karwasińska, *Święty Wojciech. Wybór Pism*, Warszawa 1996.

² *Adalbertus et nocte pariter ac die uelut dulcissimus cubicularius imperiali camere adhesit. Hoc autem non sic, uelut seculi aliquo amore captus, sed quia dilexi ipsum et dulcibus dictis ad amorem celestis patrie accendere uoluit.* Vita Prior 23: S. Adalberti Pragensis Episcopi et Martyris Vita Prior, ed. J.Karwasińska, *Monumenta Poloniae Historica, series nova IV, 1*, Warszawa 1962, p.35.

³ Adalbert survived as he was on exile by Emperor, also his brother Sobieslav who was with Polish Boleslav on military expedition against pagan Lutitians remains alive. Also another Adalbert's brother Gaudentius, future archbishop, and Adalbert's half-brother Radla who was also clerical escape death as they were not present in Libice.

⁴ G.Labuda, *Święty Wojciech...*, p.229 and 238; R.Michałowski, *Zjazd Gnieźnieński. Religijne przesłanki powstania arcybiskupstwa gnieźnieńskiego*, Wrocław 2005, p.214. Idea, that it was originally decided to create St Adalbert's Archdiocese in Prague is simply an absurd, cf. K.Görich, *Ein Erzbisum in Prag oder in Gnesen?* "Zeitschrift für Ostforschung" 1991, 40, p.10-27.

⁵ For Boleslav's coronation in 1000 argue J.Fried, *Otto III und Boleslaw Chrobry. Das Widmungsbild des Aachener Evangeliiars, das Akt von Gnesen und das frühe polnische und ungarische Königtum*, Stuttgart 2001 (quite convincing about coronation but including an unacceptable idea about plans to establish St Adalbert's archdiocese in Prague!). Against this theory argue most of Polish historians (excluding old paper of T.Wasilewski), see e.g. G.Labuda, *Zjazd Gnieźnieński roku 1000 w oświetleniu ikonograficznym*, "Kwartalnik Historyczny" 1991, 98/2, p.3-18.

⁶ The cult of St Adalbert spread immediately after his martyrdom across almost all the Europe. See especially: A.Gieysztor, *Rzymska studzienka ze św. Wojciechem z roku około 1000*, in: *Sztuka i historia*, Warszawa 1966, p.22-29; A.Gieysztor, *Sanctus et Gloriosissimus martyr Christi Adalbertus. Eglise missionnaires alentour de l'An Mille*, in: *Settimane di Studi del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo*, vol.14, Spoleto 1967, p.611-647; T.Dunin-Wąsowicz, *Le culte de Saint Adalbert vers l'an 1000 et la fondation de l'église saint Adalbert a Liege*, in: *La Collegiate Saint Jean de Liege*, Liege 1981, p.35-38; T.Dunin-Wąsowicz, *Wezwania św. Wojciecha w Europie Zachodniej około roku 1000*, "Studia Warmińskie" 1982, 19, p.31-43; M.Rokosz, *Z ottońskiej propagandy kultu św. Wojciecha (jeszcze raz o rzymskiej fundacji na Wyspie Tybrowej)*, "Studia Warmińskie" 1996, 30,

p.45-60; J.Fried, Gnesen – Aachen – Rom. Otto III. Und der Kult des hl. Adalbert. Beobachtungen zum älteren Adalbertsleben, in: Polen und Deutschland vor 1000 Jahren, Die Berliner Tagung über den Akt von Gnesen, M.Borgolte ed., Berlin 2002, p.235-279.

⁷ S. Adalberti Pragensis Episcopi et Martyris Vita Prior, J.Karwasińska, ed., Monumenta Poloniae Historica, series nova IV/1, Warszawa 1962; S.Adalberti Pragensis Episcopi et Martyris Vita Altera auctore Brunone Querfurtensi, J.Karwasińska ed., Monumenta Poloniae Historica, series nova IV/2, Warszawa 1969; cf. J.Karwasińska, op.cit.

⁸ G.Labuda, Święty Wojciech..., p.216. Truso is recorded in the 9th century in Kings Alfred version of Orosius' Chorography mentioning Wulfstan traveling by boat to that spot from Hedeby full seven days and nights: Pauli Orosii Historiarum adversus Paganorum Liber primus, 20: Źródła skandynawskie i anglosaskie do dziejów Słowiańszczyzny, wyd. G.Labuda, Warszawa 1961, s.69. Truso was finally discovered close to Elbląg in small village Janów Pomorski, see M.Jagodziński, M.Kasprzycka, The early medieval craft and commercial centre at Janów Pomorski near Elbląg on the South Baltic coast, „Antiquity”, 1991, nr.65, s.696-715.

⁹ As a market place (mercaturum ubi confluerat unda populorum) the spot appears in Vita altera 25 (MPH, sn, IV/2, Warszawa 1969, p.31); Vita prior mention a town (uilla) where arrive a plenty of people (congregat se undique... uulgas), Vita prior (28), MPH sn, IV/1, p.42.

¹⁰ S. Adalberti pragensis episcopi et martyris vita prior, 28: MPH sn, IV/1, p.42.

¹¹ Cf. Rimberti Vita Anskari, in: Quellen des 9. und 11 Jahrhundert zur Geschichte der Hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches, W.Trillmich ed., Darmstadt 1961. C.F.Hallencreutz, Rimbert, Sverige och religionsmötet, in: Boken om Ansgar, C.H.Hallencreutz, T.Hållander eds., Stockholm 1986, s.163-180.

¹² The fundamental question is here if *dominus villae* from Vita prior, 28 (MPH sn, IV/1, p.42) is the same person as somebody who *in ingressu regni positus bonos hospites eo loci dimissit* and for that the assembly this person *mortem minantur: domum incendere, diuisis rebus uxores et filios uendere spumante ira pollicentur*, Vita altera 25, MPH sn, IV/2, p.32. The great importance of the episode proved Karol Modzelewski, Barbarzyńska Europa, Warszawa 2004, p.456-457.

¹³ The boat arrived in secret: *nautae sanctum onus deponunt, et nocturno auxilio remeantes, securam fugam capiunt*, Vita altera 24; cf. Vita prior 28.

¹⁴ Vita altera 28. Thietmara (IV, 28) mention that the pagans the corps of the Saint *pelago mersere* do not sounds credible as the Pruthenians finally sale the relics to Boleslav!

¹⁵ L.P.Słupecki, Święty Wojciech i miejsce jego męczeństwa. Misja w strefie pogranicza? In print.

¹⁶ S.Mielczarski, Wokół miejsca śmierci świętego Wojciecha, in: Święty Wojciech w tradycji i kulturze europejskiej, K.Śmigiel ed., Gniezno 1992, p.143-158; J.Powierski, Śmierć świętego Wojciecha i jej miejsce w świetle starszych źródeł, „Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie”, 3 (201), Olsztyn 1993, p.375-389.

¹⁷ Passio from Tegernsee: Passio Sancti Adalberti Martyris, Monumenta Poloniae Historica, vol.1, A.Bielowski ed., Lwów 1864, p.153-156.

¹⁸ Adalbert - *urbi quoque Cholinum appropinquans venerat in quoddam nemus ciuitati propinquum, satis uenustam in quo erat planities iocunda...* Passio from Tegernsee 3: MPH, vol.1, p.154.

¹⁹ G.Labuda, Święty Wojciech..., p.260 and 273; T.Dunin-Wąsowicz, Pereum mediovale, „Felix Ravenna. Rivista di antichità ravennati, cristiane e bizantine”, 1978/2, p.91-94.

²⁰ W.Chudziak, Wczesnośredniowieczna przestrzeń sakralna in Culmine na Pomorzu Nadwiślańskim, Toruń 2003, s.77-97.