

Many communities, too little community? Conclusions on the analysis of region-integrating forces in medieval Silesia

Abstract:

The contents of this volume may disappoint those readers who would wish to find simple answers to traditional questions about the moment at which the Silesian region came to life and the role played in it by different social groups. The results of research performed by historians prove that these questions are in fact anachronistic. The authors reject the deterministic concept of the region's evolution from a polycentric community to a monocentric (with Wrocław as its capital city) unit of state and Church administration. Indeed, phenomena which are typically recognized as elements of this process are highlighted, but attributed different meanings. The picture of the region provided in the course of research is very dynamic. The authors' aim was not to discover the nature of phenomena taking place within 'the region', but rather to determine the true number of the many regions co-existing at the time, to examine the dynamics and factors behind the constantly-changing affiliations of their members, and to shed light on how the community was affected by top-down political decisions. A continuous interplay of various factors, among which the connection of political and economic elites with the traditions of local duchies was of pivotal importance, meant that although Silesia would undoubtedly prove a durable entity, at the end of Middle Ages an understanding of its past, present and future as a region remained far from certain.

Keywords:

regiogenesis, region as network, instability of a region, polycentric structure of region

The contents of this volume may bring disappointment to those readers who would wish to find answers to the following questions: From when can we speak of the emergence of Silesia? Which social groups were primarily responsible for the formation of the region of Silesia? And finally, when did Silesia eventually break its bonds with Poland and Bohemia, starting to function as an independent region? The results of research performed by historians from a range of backgrounds prove that these questions are in fact anachronistic. This is because the authors reject the deterministic concept of the region's evolution from a polycentric community (whose dependence on larger units of political authority was limited) to a monocentric (with Wrocław as its capital city) unit of state and Church administration. Indeed, phenomena which are typically recognized as elements of this process are highlighted, but attributed different meanings.

The picture of the region provided in the course of research is very dynamic. The authors' aim was not to find answers to questions on the nature of the phenomena taking place within 'the region', but rather to determine the true number of the many regions co-existing at the time, to examine the dynamics and factors behind the constantly-changing

affiliations of their members, and to shed light on how the community was affected by top-down political decisions regarding the appointment of state and Church administrative units of the entire Odra region. Only after providing this dynamic picture could one revisit the fundamental issues of the pivotal factors and landmarks in the process of formation and continuity of the Silesian regional community. Yet the answers to these questions remain unequivocal. What is remarkable, at the close of the 15th century the region called Silesia was not a particularly coherent whole. It may rather be described as a dynamic network of relations which, during subsequent stages of its history, could have developed quite different characteristics than these of the 19th- and 20th-century Silesia we are well familiar with.

The unique diversity of this region, which came into existence along the banks of the Odra river, was undoubtedly connected with local geographic conditions. These were by no means determiners of Silesia's historical boundaries. The territory of the Odra region is not limited by any natural boundaries, except for its southern part where it is flanked by the majestic Carpathian mountains. However, even this natural barrier is not airtight: a gap located in its south-eastern section links the region with the lands further south. As far as the issue of landform is concerned, today's Silesia may be divided in two parts, which bear more similarities to their neighbouring regions than to the structure they are technically part of. And so, the south-eastern part of Silesia resembles Lesser Poland, while its northern part resembles Greater Poland. What is more, also the south-western and central parts with the mixed landscape of the Sudetes and lowlands of the Wrocław region are of a very unique character. Certainly this picture can be further supplemented by details on a number of smaller territorial units with unique geographic and topographic characteristics. It is of no less importance for the formation of territorial communities that diversity of landscape translates into diversity of soil types, as well as into conditions for crop cultivation and animal breeding. Also, it is hard to point to a specific geographical element that could be considered crucial for the formation of Silesia within the territorial limits that are known to us from its most recent history.

A natural consequence of this was the absence of a uniform political structure shared by all the tribes residing within Silesia between the 9th and 10th centuries. The continual rivalry between the members of the Přemyslid (Bohemia) and the Piast (Poland) dynasties, providing numerous occasions for the Silesian community to wage joint battles against a common enemy, did not translate into its unification. Only at the turn of the 11th century were the first attempts made to create an administrative unit that was to encompass residents of both the middle and the upper Odra regions – the bishopric, with Wrocław as its capital. Throughout the 11th century and at the outset of the 12th century the province (*provincia*) of the Odra region became one of the principal units of political administration of the Piast state. Nonetheless, it was not until the 12th century when its inhabitants started to be designated as Silesians (*Ślęzacy*). Another question that still

needs to be answered is whether this name was a reference to the name of the tribe of *Ślężanie*, who occupied the region in the 11th century, or perhaps to the name of the mountain peak of *Ślęza*, worshipped between the 10th and 11th centuries by pre-Christian inhabitants of the region. The formation of the so-called Silesian identity within the community of residents of the Odra region was not a homogeneous process. Initially it involved – to a varying degree – primarily political elites from the entire territory of the Odra river basin. However, from the second half of the 12th century a new aspect of Silesian identity started to gain strength. From this moment onwards, Silesia was considered to comprise only territories of the upper and middle Odra region controlled by the descendants of Boleslaus I the Tall (1163–1201) and his son Henry I the Bearded (1201–1238). The south-eastern territories of the Odra region were incorporated into the Duchy of Racibórz (also referred to as the Duchy of Opole) and went into the hands of the descendants of Mieszko the Tanglefoot (1163–1211), who was Boleslaus I's brother.

It is beyond any doubt that by the 12th century – and more specifically, from the moment Boleslaus I the Tall accepted the title of Duke of Silesia – we may speak of Silesia as a political organism. The new region was formed in the course of decisions made by elites, who had much regard for the bonds linking the members of Silesia's social groups and their beliefs. The Silesia of the time was a malleable structure crucially dependent on the fate of its sovereign Piast rulers. It was they who, between the 13th and 14th centuries, repeatedly divided the region into as many as several dozen duchies of various sizes. The only durable and uniform structure which extended its power over the entire Odra region was the Wrocław Bishopric. However, the impact of Church administration on the formation of the sense of the region's continuity is not quite clear. Of greater visibility was its inhabitants' demonstration of affiliation to their local communities. Regional affiliation was expressed through identification with communities of individual, minute duchies. The gradual territorial fragmentation of Silesia did not, however, wipe out the memory of a greater Silesian political and religious community and its ideals that were attractive for the 'dukes of Silesia'.

Nonetheless, for a long time this awareness did not translate into conscious and joint political decisions on the part of the elites of all the duchies. Instead, we may observe some degree of convergence when it comes to local dukes' investment strategies. Between the 13th and 14th centuries the territories of the northern and middle part of the Odra region – at that time referred to as 'Silesia' – were subject to a particularly intensive process of colonization accompanied by the establishment of villages based on German law and location of towns. As a result of this process – while it is not yet possible to speak of any sort of economic activity that was particularly unique for this region – Silesia undoubtedly stood out against its neighbours with its exceptionally high level of urbanization and efficient agricultural production. What is clear in this respect is the impact of model investment processes developed by the dukes of Silesia on changes introduced by

the dukes of the southern Odra region in their duchies. This spurred the formation in the north and south of the Odra region of two distinct economies whose functioning was in fact based on similar principles. The common characteristics of these two economic models (a dense urban network and well-developed financial administration in villages) made it easier for them to maintain mutual relations. In the end, even their differences, whose growing number started to push the regions away from each other starting in the mid-14th century, were not powerful enough to break commercial contacts associated with main trading routes. Nonetheless, at the close of the Middle Ages, Silesia did not yet constitute a coherent economic region. In fact, to the contrary, its southern extremes – the lands of Racibórz and Opava – were much more closely associated with Bohemia and Lesser Poland than with other Silesian territories. The fact of their continuous affiliation with the Silesia region was, however, determined by political factors.

The assumption of power over the entire territory of the upper and middle Odra region in the first half of the 14th century (1327–1339) by John of Luxembourg, King of Bohemia did not result in the formation of a uniform system of royal administration in Silesia. Neither did it lead to the development in its inhabitants of a sense of belonging to a uniform political community of the Bohemian Crown. Again, to the contrary, the political strategy of the sovereigns of Bohemia towards the inhabitants of the Odra region highlighted various types of relations between the rulers of Prague and local authorities. Firstly, the rulers of ‘Silesia’ (which comprised the northern and middle part of the Odra region) were distinguished from those of ‘Poland’ (which comprised the southern part of the Odra region). Secondly, emphasis was placed on the independent character of relations between the kings and dukes-vassals of the Crown, which stood out against their relations with the subjects of duchies whose exclusive sovereigns were the rulers of Bohemia (the Duchies of Wrocław and Świdnica-Jawor). Despite this fact, the administrative dependence of all local political subjects on Prague favoured the development of a general sense of shared interests. Its most conspicuous sign was the fact of undertaking joint political campaigns against the Hussites.

The Hussite Wars (1420–1434) led to the unification of all political forces independently of the actions of Bohemian sovereigns. Even though this unification proved not durable, in the first half of the 15th century it turned out to be crucial for the spread of the name ‘Silesia’ in reference to the entire Odra region. However, this did not mean full acceptance of its political or administrative community. Despite the painful Hussite experience and the efforts of King Matthias Corvinus (1469–1490) to build a uniform system of administration for the whole of Silesia, at the close of the 15th century the sense of unique identity felt by elites and ducal families of particular duchies continued to weaken the power of regional identity.

Alongside dukes and associated political elites, certain social groups also facilitated integration across the territory of Silesia to a limited degree. On one hand, the economic

and political activity of the vast majority of knights and burghers was limited to individual duchies. We cannot say much about the activity of the peasantry. On the other hand, traceable routes of migration followed by many generations of urban elites were most frequently found within the lands of the Odra river basin, with their central junctions in Wrocław, Opole and Nysa. At the same time, Silesian burghers were migrating to Prussia and – on a smaller scale – to Greater and Lesser Poland. Based on the current state of research on the subject, it is quite difficult to assess whether the migrants' choice of final destination was dependent on their sense of sharing a common language, economy and customs (relating to Silesia), or by economic resources which determined the actual range of their migration. Finally, it may be said that the social diversity of the inhabitants of the Odra region played a rather neutral role in the formation of the regional community. What was more crucial for this process was the issue of ethnic diversity. A clear tendency among Silesians to respect distinct legal traditions of various ethnic groups, understand them and incorporate them into their own legal system was not countered by the contemporary political context. Similar issues surfaced independently of the territorial boundaries of duchies, and they were solved in the common context of the entire province. The emergence of a unique 'nation of Silesia' out of the cultural mixture of Polish-speaking inhabitants and German-speaking newcomers of the time did not take away their ethnic identity. The identity of Silesians was founded on their acceptance of diversity as a fundamental element of life. This acceptance did not equal a broad, ideologically grounded tolerance. To the contrary, it came as a result of their pragmatic approach to the issue of ethnic diversity. This very pragmatic approach meant that in the 13th and 14th centuries, Jews – who possessed the capital Christians were keen to borrow – were permitted to reside in Silesian towns. What is especially remarkable in the context of the region's diversity is that, although they were finally driven out of the towns of northern and middle Silesia in the 15th century, those residing in the south remained there until the close of the century.

Two distinct trends, one being a lasting sense of being part of a larger, Silesian community – the strength of which varied according to geographical location – and the growing identification of Silesians with the local context of duchies and towns, found their manifestation in culture. Numerous works of Silesian historiography, created in monasteries and ducal courts, highlighted both the common history of the lands comprising the province and its fragmentation into territories ruled by various members of the Piast dynasty and later by various ducal families. What is more, from the mid-14th century we may notice a tendency to sacrifice the independence of Silesia and its duchies for the sake of strengthening relations with the Bohemian Crown. The case with Silesian art was similar. In fact, while we can observe some tendencies in Gothic architecture and sculpture specific to the region, a unique, typically Silesian art style did not really develop. Moreover, strong Bohemian influences did not manage to eradicate unique artistic tendencies within

the duchies. Nonetheless, some characteristics did exist that were particular to the so-called ‘Silesian’ art, especially when it comes to the period of the Late Middle Ages.

The sense of Silesian independence and the geographic range of Silesian identity was mostly determined by political factors, especially the need to manage a subservient, remote community first by the rulers of Poland and later by those of Bohemia. No less important were the dynastic traditions of the Piasts and the ambitions of this family’s members – as well as later dukes of other dynasties – to build a state which, while very small, would be as independent as possible. For one thing, they had a crucial impact on shaping the sense of belonging to a Silesia which was perceived as part of a larger community juxtaposed with other political formations, such as the Piast duchies ruled by non-members of its Silesian line, and later the Kingdoms of Poland and Bohemia. For another, their emphasis on the independence of individual duchies hindered every attempt at permanent integration of the community of the entire Odra region. Social and economic phenomena which determined political decisions were until the 15th century of an ambivalent nature for the formation of a uniform Odra region.

The vision of the province’s history that was widely popularized in the Middle Ages evolved from the dynastic traditions of the local dukes. It was this vision that determined the favourable conditions for the development of the sense of unity of the inhabitants of Silesia – the land of the descendants of Boleslaus I the Tall and Henry I the Bearded, and later those of Ladislaus the Exile. The shape of this community, its coherence and durability were not consolidated neither at the close of the 12th century – when the region was being born – nor at the close of the 15th century, when its position among various contemporary political and administrative units was established. A continuous interplay of various factors, among which the connection of political and economic elites with the traditions of local duchies was of pivotal importance, meant that although Silesia would undoubtedly prove a durable entity, at the end of Middle Ages an understanding of its past, present and future remained far from certain.