

Seal container (?) from Poznań-Ostrów Tumski

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Archaeological research and architectural studies carried out in the ducal part of the stronghold in Ostrów Tumski in Poznań unearthed remains of a duke's palace (Fig. 1). A unique clay container was found in a chamber adjoining the palace hall on the north (Fig. 2). Judging by the imprints on the inside walls of the object, it could have been made to protect a seal affixed to a document by a cord (Fig. 3). The surface was stamped with imprints of a crouching dog, guard of the seal. This finding, together with matrices and a lead ducal *bullā*, suggests the presence of a chancery in the Poznań stronghold, where documents were not only stored, but also drawn up.

KEY-WORDS: Poznań-Ostrów Tumski, Early Medieval Period, seal

The main objective of excavations carried out from 1999 by the Institute of Prehistory of Adam Mickiewicz University in the area around the Church of Our Lady in Poznań-Ostrów Tumski (Cathedral Island) was to investigate the Early Piasts' ducal residence. Archaeological and architectural research in the area around today's church led to the unearthing of a *palatium* (Kóčka-Krenz 2005) and provided sufficient data for a reconstruction of the building's appearance. It was built of stone on a rectangular plan, extending from north to south and sloping a little to the west; a projecting entrance was located in the south-east corner. Judging by the remains of wall foundations, in the middle of the building there was an *aula regia* measuring 11.60×8.80 m (102 m²) and next to it, on the south side, another chamber measuring 8.80×5.80 m (51 m²). Two other rooms with entrances from the *aula* were situated in the northern part of the building, one being a small corridor-like space 0.90 m wide and 5 m long (4.5 m²), and the other a chamber measuring 6.80×5 m (34 m²). Excavations in this last chamber in 2005 (Fig. 1) yielded an abundant assemblage, including a unique clay object which has shed light on the function of the room. The layer in which it was found (trench 37, layer V) has been dated on the grounds of the stratigraphy and archaeological data to the 11th–12th centuries.

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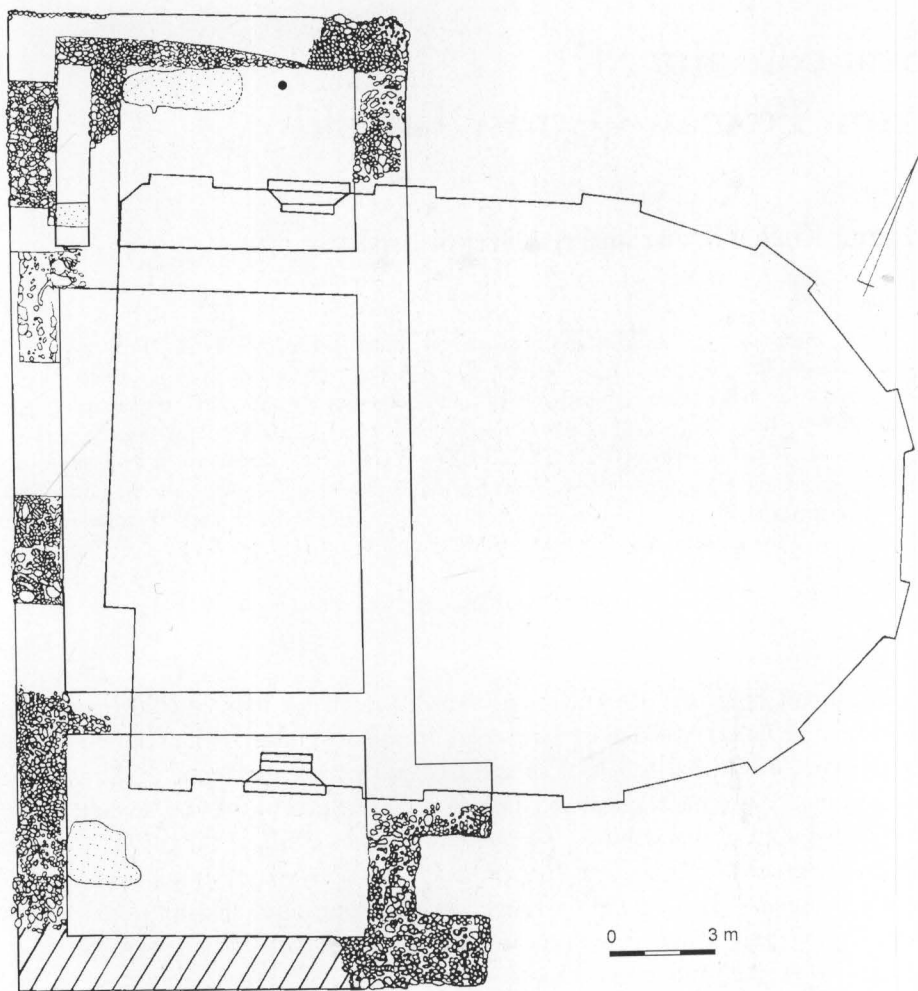


Fig. 1. Poznań-Ostrów Tumski. The foundations of the *palatium*. – finds spot of clay container.
 Drawn by Olga Antowska-Gorączniak.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FINDING

The item under consideration (No. 160/05; 418w/05), roughly spherical in shape, measuring about 5.5×5.7 cm, appears to be the remaining half of an object of clay, broken when the contents was extracted (Fig. 2). The imprint on the inside walls of the object (Fig. 3) suggests that it had once been used to protect something flat and round, most likely a seal, 3.5–4.0 cm in diameter and 0.5–0.6 cm thick. Stamped



Fig. 2. Poznań-Ostrów Tumski. Stamp on the container's surface.
Photo: Piotr Namiota.

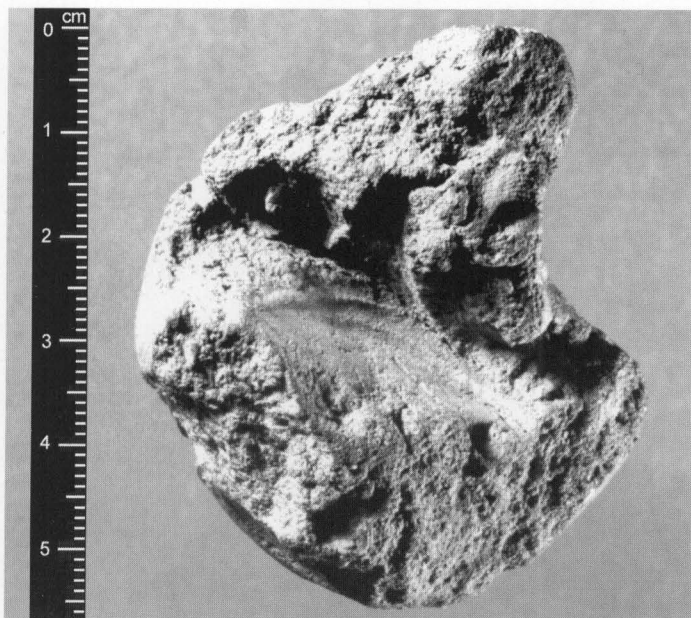


Fig. 3. Poznań-Ostrów Tumski. Imprint of a seal (?) on the inside walls of the container. Photo: Piotr Namiota.



Fig. 4. Poznań-Ostrów Tumski. Image of a dog. Photo: Piotr Namiota.

on the outside surface of the object are images of a four-legged creature – one full image and two fragmentary ones, but evidently representing the same motif. The animal was portrayed in profile with a blunt muzzle, pricked up ears and tufted tail arching over the back. The beast appears to be crouching on its haunches, the front legs stretched forward. A convex line marks an oval medallion around the image, measuring 2.4×1.9 cm (Fig. 4). An *intaglio* technique appears to have been used for these imprints.

It was made of clay containing some mineral (sand and grit, measuring $0.5\text{--}2/3$ mm) and organic temper (capillaries black with soot). The pellets used to form it were 2.7 cm (the lower one from the underside to the surface of the seal imprint) and 2.6 cm thick (upper one), stuck together by hand around the seal (?) inside. The pressure was such that no seam can be discerned. The shell was then dried and smoothed with a hard polisher (1.5 cm wide), the diagonal polishing strokes of the tool still to be seen on the surface. A finger was subsequently pressed into the middle of one side (fingerprint about 2 cm in diameter). As a last measure, the clay container was stamped with a signet-ring bearing an image of a four-legged creature. To judge by the imprints preserved on the remaining part of the object, there must have been at least five stamps in all.

The object in its present condition has been refired in fully oxidized conditions¹ (the cultural layer in which it was found yielded abundant evidence of heavy burning), but originally it was only well dried.

The seal (?) inside this shell appears to have been wrapped first in a piece of cloth, an impression of which can be seen on the flat inside surface of the clay. The cloth appears to have been folded up against the upper part of the item. An impression of yarn and/or cord Z/3?, 0.820 mm thick, has also been recognized on this surface.

TEXTILE IMPRESSIONS

Analysis of the biggest and the best preserved fragment (6 × 4 mm) of the shallow cloth impressions, found on both the outside and inside surfaces of the clay shell, identified it as twill weave 2/2, not felted (or felted?), type 8 or 8a², sort III. The colour could not be determined.

Table 1. Poznań-Ostrów Tumski, site 9/10. Measurements of a cloth impression found on the clay shell.

Warp-weft	Compactness	Yarn thickness	Strand	Raw material
Warp	14 threads/1 cm	0.328–0.410 mm average 0.351 mm thread 0.175 mm	Z/2S Angle 35°	?, fibre thickness 0.013–0.016 mm average 0.015 mm
Weft	10 threads/1 cm	0.377–0.525 mm average 0.460 mm thread 0.230 mm	S/2? Angle 35–38°	?, fibre thickness 0.013–0.016 mm average 0.015 mm

Remark: plain cloth used to polish the surface of the item and to wrap its contents

Another rather deep impression observed on the outside surface of the shell, about 0.8 cm from the imprint of a signet-ring, turned out to be the imprint of a partly unstranded cord. The colour was not determined and the strand was identified as non-woven, made up of five parts. The sample measured 22 mm in section.

Table 2. Poznań-Ostrów Tumski, site 9/10.

Measurements of a cord impression found on the outside of the clay shell.

String/yarn	Yarn thickness	Strand	Raw material
Yarn	1.050–1.250 mm average 1.158 mm 1 thread 0.230 mm	Z/3Z/2S	?; fibre thickness 0.013 mm

Remark: weak strand

¹ Colour: reddish-yellow (5YR 5/6, 5/8 – *Munsell...* 1973), greyish-brown and brown (10YR 5/4, 5/6) with darker spots (7.5YR 5/4, 5/6).

² According to the typology proposed for wool cloth (Maik 1988: 75–8).

Table 3. Poznań-Ostrów Tumski, site 9/10.
Measurements of a cord impression found on the inside of the clay shell.

String/yarn	Yarn thickness	Strand	Raw material
Yarn	0.820 mm 1 thread 0.273 mm	Z/3? Angle 38–40°	?; fibre thickness 0.013 mm

Remark: weak strand, probably incomplete, see Table 2

An irregular impression of yarn or unstranded cord was recognised on the flat inside surface of the shell. The section of the sample was about 12 mm. The colour was not determined and the strand was identified as non-woven, made up of three parts.

INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDING

The clay shell with signet-ring imprints appears to have been the covering of a round object, the negative form of which is clearly recognizable in the section (Fig. 3). Its shape and size, as well as the impressions of cloth and cords on the clay shell suggest that it was a seal affixed to a document by a cord. It was rather thin, about 0.5 cm thick, and hence required protection from accidental damage while being transported the long way to Poznań, together with the document it was attached to. This purported seal fits the dimensions of Early Medieval seals (*Ornamenta...* 1985, vol. 2; *Europas...* 2000: 456–458, cat. nos. 22.01.03, 22.01.02 and 22.01.04). The clay shell covering it was authenticated with stamps of a signet-ring bearing an image of a four-legged creature, probably a dog (Fig. 4). The dog in the Middle Ages was a symbol of fidelity and vigilance; in Christian symbolics, it represented a guardian and herd leader, and was also an allegory of a priest (Cirlot 2000: 314; Biedermann 2003: 283–4). This further reinforced the authentication purpose of the signet-ring imprint (Biedermann 2003: 281). The crouching dog imaged on the clay shell may be considered as a guard of the seal.

Gems, very popular in Antiquity, were prized in Medieval times (Henderson 1984: 114–8). The Merovingians had them set in gold or silver (gold-framed) and more seldom bronze finger rings and in round golden fibulas decorated with filigree, to emphasise the position of their owners in the social hierarchy. They were found with burials made in churches and church graveyards, especially in the Rhineland and in the eastern part of the land of the Franks (Ament 1991). Many were used to decorate objects of religious cult (Roth 1996: 632, fig. 498). Antique gems set in rings served the Longobardian rulers of the 7th century as seals (von Hessen 1983; Kurze 1986). Animal motifs were frequent on precious stones and glass, on both antique gems (Krug 1980: 183, 244–5, fig. 73: 58 and 125: 414, 415; Krug 1995: 202–3,

fig. 48: 24) and those manufactured later (Schulze-Dörrlamm 1990: 215–6). Glass gems, which were at first rather rare in Medieval times and as precious as antique ones, became more common in the end of the 12th and in the 13th century (Schulze-Dörrlamm 1990: 219). Cologne may have been a centre of their production in the 12th century. The oldest gems with animal motifs (type Ib, dated from about 1000 to the first quarter of the 13th century, occasionally to the second half of the 13th century) decorated objects made of gold in two regions, south Germany and Switzerland. They were treated as devotional articles which included references to the saints' care and objects to protect their owner (Schulze-Dörrlamm 1990: 221). The nearest analogy to the image stamped on the container from Poznań may be a running dog with blunt muzzle, ears pricked up and a tufted tail arching over the back, known from a glass gem on the back side of Saint Godehard's box reliquary (12th century), now in the treasury of the Hildesheim cathedral (Alfs 1938: 22, fig. 6).

Gems were used as seals also in Poland. These were usually antique *intaglios* with inscriptions naming their owners. Examples of gem imprints in sphragistics from the 12th–15th centuries have been listed by S.K. Kuczyński (1964; see also Brzostowicz 1993: 61–2), who also believed that the fact that one of the signatories of the Toruń Treaty of 1466 used an *intaglio* meant that he did not possess a seal of his own. F. Piekosiński (1899: 8) advanced the idea that the first Piast rulers were already using signet-ring seals with gems, probably antique ones; as proof he cited the examples of Mieszko Lambert from 1145 and Janisław from 1375 (Piekosiński 1899: 26, 267). Polish seals bore images of various animals: lions, eagles and griffons, seldom deer and horses (see Piekosiński 1899, 1936). Never a dog, however, even though a dog image sometimes accompanied the main motif on seals, such as that of Louis the Hungarian from 1370 (Piekosiński 1899: 259).

Seals were frequently protected, being placed in various kinds of containers, including bags made of brocade, silk or embroidered linen, and in the 13th and 14th centuries also leather cases (Szymański 1976: 516–7). The clay shell from Poznań is unique because of the material it was made of and the authenticating stamps on it, meant to protect the contents until it reached the addressee. Any tampering with the seal itself would have caused irreparable damage to this protective shell.

Such shells may have been much more common in Medieval times and the fact that so few have been found is a factor of the impermanence of the material they were made of. Once broken, the shells would have been thrown away and disintegrated easily. The object from Poznań survived only because it was accidentally fired shortly after being discarded.

It is impossible based on the available evidence to identify the owner of the signet-ring used to stamp the protective shell over the seal. Neither can the chronology and place of origin of the gem be determined. It could have been either an antique item or an Early Medieval one. Nonetheless, the finding of a stamped clay shell for

a seal (?) in the area of the *palatium* has contributed to the evidence for a chancery existing in the Poznań stronghold. Other finds from Ostrów Tumski have included a used up lead seal, a bronze seal belonging to Jacob, lector of the Dominicans (Dębski and Marciniak 2005), and a lead *bullā* belonging to Prince Bolesław the Wrymouth, all leading to the conclusion that the chancery here had not only kept documents, but had also had the means to draw them up as well.

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