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## The battles fought by Mieszko I for Pomerania-on-Oder

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THE BATTLES FOUGHT BY MIESZKO I FOR POMERANIA-ON-ODER<sup>1</sup>

In the 960s Mieszko I concentrated his efforts on territorial expansion of his possessions. One of the stages of the expansion of the lands controlled by the duke of the Polanians (Polanie) was his attempt to conquer Pomerania. The conquest of Pomerania was of great importance to him. Expanding the country's domination towards the Baltic Sea and the Oder estuary meant a possibility of a closer trade exchange with Scandinavia and other overseas countries<sup>2</sup>. It seems that Mieszko I started off by annexing

<sup>1</sup> The present paper has been based on a part of a chapter written by the author and included in the monograph entitled *Historia wojen i wojskowości polskiej (A History of Warfare and the Polish War Art)*, vol. 1, which is to be published by the Academy of National Defence.

<sup>2</sup> The more important literature dealing with the wars fought by Mieszko I is very rich. The researchers, however, have focused on a reconstruction of the political events. The publications discussing the military aspects are far less numerous. The more important works are as follows: A. F. G r a b s k i, *Polska sztuka wojenna w okresie wczesnofeudalnym (The Polish War Art in the Early Feudal Period)*, Warszawa 1959; B. M i ś k i e w i c z, *Pierwsze walki w obronie granicy zachodniej Polski wczesnofeudalnej (The First Battles Fought in Defence of the Western Frontier of Early Feudal Poland)*, „Studia i Materiały do Dziejów Wielkopolski i Pomorza”, vol. V, 1958, fasc. 1, pp. 17-23; by the same author, *Studia nad obroną polskiej granicy zachodniej w okresie wczesnofeudalnym (Studies in the Defence of the Polish Western Frontier in the Early Feudal Period)*, Poznań 1961, pp. 222-228; by the same author, *Wojny o zjednoczenie Pomorza Zachodniego z Polską za pierwszych Piastów (The Fights for the Unification of Western Pomerania and Poland in the Time of the First Piasts)* [in:] *Z dziejów wojennych Pomorza Zachodniego. Cedynia 972 - Siekierki 1945 (From the War History of Western Pomerania. Cedynia 972 - Siekierki 1945)*, Poznań 1972, pp. 88-119; A. N a d o l s k i, *Polskie siły zbrojne i sztuka wojenna w początkach państwa polskiego (Polish Forces and the Art of War at the Beginnings of the Polish State)*, [in:] *Początki państwa polskiego. Księga tysiąclecia (The Beginnings of the Polish State. The Millennium Book)* vol. 1, Poznań 1962, pp. 206-212; A. F. G r a b s k i, *Bolesław Chrobry. Zarys dziejów politycznych i wojskowych (Bolesław I the Brave. An Outline of the Political and Military History)*, Warszawa 1964, pp. 19-21, 31-34; A. F. G r a b s k i, A. N a d o l s k i, *Wojskowość polska w okresie wczesnofeudalnym do roku 1138 (The Polish Military Science in the Early Feudal Period to the Year 1138)* [in:] *Zarys dziejów wojskowości polskiej do roku 1864 (An Outline of Polish Military History to the Year 1864)*, ed. J. Sikorski, vol. I, Warszawa 1965, pp. 60-72; T. M. N o w a k, J. W i m m e r, *Historia oręża polskiego (A History of Polish Arms. 963-1795)*, Warszawa 1970, pp. 42-44; P. B u n a r, S. A. S r o k a, *Wojny,*

Eastern Pomerania to Poland and erecting a resilient stronghold in Gdańsk<sup>3</sup>. Then he began to conquer the district of Lubusko and Pomerania-on-Oder. The district of Lubusko became part of Poland before the year 965 and it was a handy base from which to attack the inhabitants of the land around the Oder estuary (the Wieleci tribe union was also very interested in them). Besides, Poland's taking control of the district of Lubusko made it more difficult for the Wieleci tribe to militarily cooperate with the allied Bohemian state in the face of a most probable armed conflict with the Wieleci tribe, resulting from annexing the area on the lower Oder River by Mieszko I.

Written sources do not provide any information about when Mieszko I started his armed activities. This might have happened in 963-966, when the tribe's domination over Pomerania-on-Oder was seriously endangered and the first armed conflicts with the Wieleci tribe took place.

Ibrahim ibn Jakub wrote: „The people of Weltaba<sup>4</sup> ... live in marshlands on the side which is close to the west and a part of the north ... They fight with Mesko and their battle strength is great”<sup>5</sup>. During the fights for the Oder estuary, which might have ended in Mieszko's seizure of Szczecin, there took place an armed conflict with the Wieleci and Wolinianie tribes, who were determined to halt the Polish conquest of Pomerania. A few information about the conflict can be found in written sources. Relating the story of Wichman, a defiant Saxonian magnate who rebelled against the Emperor Otto I, a Saxonian monk Widukind writes that the man living with the Wieleci tribe became the commander of their forces and defeated Mieszko twice, killed his brother and got rich

*bitwy i potyczki w średniowiecznej Polsce. Słownik (Wars, Battles and Skirmishes in Medieval Poland. A Glossary)*, Kraków 1996, pp. 13-15. Also cf.: G. L a b u d a, *Studia nad początkami państwa polskiego (Studies in the Beginnings of the Polish State)*, Poznań 1987 and J. S t r z e l c z y k, *Mieszko Pierwszy (Mieszko the First)*, Poznań 1992, where one can find a critical analysis of the earlier literature.

<sup>3</sup> *Historia Gdańska (A History of Gdańsk)*, ed. E. Cieślak, Gdańsk 1978, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> In *Początki Polski (The Beginnings of Poland)*, vol. V, Warszawa 1973, p. 515, H. Ł o w m i a ń s k i interprets the name as „Volynane”, that is to say, Wolinianie.

<sup>5</sup> Ibrahim ibn Jakub's account of his trip to Slavic countries can be found in Al Bekri's report, ed. T. Kowalski, *Pomniki dziejowe Polski (Poland's Historic Monuments)*, series I, part 1, Kraków 1946, p. 50.

spoils<sup>6</sup>. The mention has been differently interpreted in the historical literature<sup>7</sup>. Most historians, however, agree that Mieszko's conflicts with Wichman took place in 963. It is still unclear where the two battles were fought. One may assume that the battlefields were located in the vicinity of the Oder River north of the Warta River's confluence. Moreover, the name of Mieszko's brother killed in the fighting has never been established.

These incidences were not the end of conflicts between Poland and the Wieleci tribe. As soon as Mieszko I had strengthened his international position and had become a Christian ruler, he carried on his activities aimed at further invasion of the land situated around the lower Oder River. The Polish duke established good relations with the Emperor Otto I, became the Emperor's friend, as Widukind puts it, and thus ensured the neutrality of Germany. Through his marriage to Dobrawa, the daughter of the Bohemian prince Bolesław the Cruel, Mieszko broke the dangerous and inconvenient for him alliance formed by Bohemia and the Wieleci tribe and eventually received Bohemia's military support.

The Wolinianie tribe's campaign, which was most probably reinforced by Wieleci tribe forces was organized in 967. Mieszko I successfully managed to anticipate the enemy's intentions and ensured reinforcements in the form of two Bohemian cavalry troops. The presence of the two hundred mounted warriors sent by Bolesław I the Cruel seems to prove that the Polish duke not only noticed the danger but made the Bohemians break their old alliance and fight against their former allies.

The historic battle took place on September 21<sup>st</sup> 967. Unfortunately, the site of the encounter remains unknown. It might have been fought on the right bank of the Oder River, north of the Warta River's confluence on woodland Polish territory. Although no information about the strength of the forces can be found<sup>8</sup>, one may assume that the sides had equal numbers of warriors and that the two commanders had at their disposal about two or three thousand soldiers each. Wichman's forces consisted only of infantrymen, while Mieszko I had his own mounted soldiers, called „loricati”, the Bohemian troops on horseback, as well as Polish infantry troops raised by levy („clipeati”).

Before the battle the Wolinianie stood in strong close column formation consisting of several rows of warriors. According to Wichman's plan, that column was to break up the battle array of the Polish troops by making an energetic frontal assault and to defeat them in hand-to-hand combat. The aim of this tactic was to disperse the enemy troops and make the survivors flee the battlefield. Because of slow manoeuvre of the battle formation used and the

fact that there was every likelihood that his troops would be encircled, Wichman secured the rear of his army by building a laager. Mieszko's troops were arrayed in a different way. In the centre there were shielded infantrymen, who stood at the front of the lines and were closest to the enemy. The cavalry troops waited on the flanks. The forces were spread out across the length and breadth of the battlefield, which made them manoeuvrable. The soldiers could be moved easily on the battlefield according to the situation. The Polish duke had a detailed plan of the battle, which he wanted to fight on a carefully chosen site.

The fighting started when Wichman attacked the Polish infantry lines: „Cumque contra eum (i.e. Mieszko) duxisset exercitum, pedites primum ei inmisit”<sup>9</sup>. The Polish commander ordered a simulated retreat and trapped the enemy into entering his lines, which made it impossible for his opponents to make use of their laager at the rear. Widukind says: „Cumque ex iussu ducis paulatim coram Wichmanno fugerunt, a castris longius protrahitur”<sup>10</sup>. The Wolinianie warriors abandoned the encampment. When Mieszko waved his banner, the cavalry launched an assault, flanked the enemy and attacked the enemy troops from the rear. Simultaneously, the infantry made a counter-attack, which took Wichman's people entirely by surprise („equitibus a tergo inmissis signo fugientes at reversionem hostium monet”<sup>11</sup>). There was a tumult in the Saxonian magnate's forces, which quickly turned into defeat. Wichman himself was made to dismount from his horse and to fight on foot. Eventually, he fled the battlefield: „cum ex adverso est post tergum premeretur Wichmannus fugam inire temptavit”<sup>12</sup>.

The Poles seized the encampment and rushed after the fleeing enemy, whose losses were high. After a long chase they finally managed to capture Wichman, who refused to give up and died in battle. Widukind says: „Ieiunio autem et longiori via per totam noctam armatus incessit, mane cum paucis admodum aream cuiusdam iam fessus intravit”<sup>13</sup>.

The course of the battle seems to suggest that Mieszko won the battle thanks to his soldiers' capabilities and his own talent for commanding troops. He commanded the Polish forces from a site situated outside the lines, from where he could control the course of events and be seen by his warriors. The fact that Mieszko ordered his infantry and his cavalry to counter-attack the enemy by waving the banner seems to support the assumption that his commanding site was clearly visible. Mieszko I was able to coordinate the manoeuvres of both his armoured and shielded warriors, whose successful cooperation ended in the spectacular defeat of the enemy. The Polish duke could rely on his troops' capacities and discipline and did not hesitate to

<sup>6</sup> G. Labuda, *Materiały źródłowe do historii Polski feudalnej (Source Material for the History of Feudal Poland)*, vol. I, Warszawa 1954, p. 197.

<sup>7</sup> H. Łowmiański openly questions its veracity, *op. cit.*, pp. 521-524.

<sup>8</sup> A.F. Grab ski, A. Nadolski, *op. cit.*, p. 67 mention several thousand warriors on each side.

<sup>9</sup> *Widukindi monachi Corbeiensis, Rerum Gestarum Saxonicarum*, ed. P. Hirsch, Hannoverae 1935, lib. III, cap. 69, p. 194.

<sup>10</sup> *ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> *ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> *ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> *ibidem*.

employ the tactic of simulated retreat, which might have ended with breaking rank and panic.

His victory over the Wolinianie and Wieleci warriors made it possible for Mieszko I to invade the rest of Pomerania. Many years later the Wieleci were still unable to mobilize troops capable of defending their own land and attacking Poland. The battle of 967 helped Mieszko capture the Oder estuary and the rich island of Wolin. This was the way Pomerania-on-Oder became part of the Polish state.

The western Polish frontier and the lands around the Oder River did not enjoy peace for a long time. A few years after the war with the Wolinianie and Wieleci tribes the geopolitical situation changed. Between Poland and the German state there were lands inhabited by the Slavs. Lusatian Serbs' territory lied in the south and the Obodryci and the Wieleci unions had their lands in the north of the region. The Germans invaded the territories, especially after the Saxonian dynasty seized power in 912. The captured territory became Eastern Marchia, governed by Margrave Geron. After his death, in 965, Marchia was divided into several parts and Margrave Hodon ruled Lusatian Marchia. Consequently, there appeared the Polish-German frontier on the Oder River and armed conflicts on the borderlands between the two states began<sup>14</sup>.

Saxonian feudal lords tried to conquer Slavonic territories situated east of the Oder River and prevent Polish territorial expansion. They frequently acted without the emperor's consent. Margrave Hodon did not approve of Poland's expansion and invasion of the lands lying around the middle and lower Oder River. It was him who decided to attack Mieszko's state without informing the Emperor Otto I. One can only guess what the motives of his decision were. After the defeat of Wichman's troops in 967, Mieszko I was strengthening his rule in Pomerania-on-Oder. Pomeranian magnates, afraid of losing their political importance, were concerned to stop Poland's expansion. They might have asked Margrave Hodon for help. The fact that Cedynia, the site of Mieszko's encounter with Hodon's troops, is situated north of the Warta River's confluence seems to support this assumption. The Polish duke could have arrived in the vicinity of Cedynia in order to conquer the territory, while Hodon led his army from the lands situated around the middle Elbe River to stop the invasion<sup>15</sup>.

Margrave Hodon set off on his expedition against Mieszko I in 972. Thietmar, the bishop of Merseburg, wrote in his chronicle: „Interea Hodo, venerabilis marchio Misecconem imperatori fidelem tributumque usque in Vurta (i.e. Warta) fluvium solventem exercitu petivit collecto. Ad cuius auxilium pater meus comes Sigifridus, tunc iuvenis necdumque ciniugali sociatus amori, veni solum cum suis et in die sancti Johannis baptistae adversus eum pugnantes pri-

moque vincentes a fratre eiusdem Cideburo (i.e. Czcibor) exceptit tantum comitibus prefatis, omnes optimi milites interfecti oppecierunt in loco qui vocatur Cidini (i.e. Cedynia)”<sup>16</sup>. This unlucky, for Hodon and his companions, battle was the first Polish-German military encounter to be mentioned in written sources. Describing it, Saint Bruno of Querfurt says: „Actum est bellum cum Polanis, dux eorum Misico arte vicit, humiliata Theutonum magnanimitas terram lambit, Hodo pugnax marchio laceris vexillis terga vertit”<sup>17</sup>.

One finds it difficult to reconstruct the battle of Cedynia. An analysis of the terrain and a reconstruction of the old settlement and road network have provided some extremely useful information<sup>18</sup>. Cedynia lies on the right bank of the Oder River, about 40 kilometres below the Warta River's confluence. In Cedynia there used to be a stronghold erected to guard the route from Magdeburg to Pomerania. It was in the vicinity of this stronghold that the battle mentioned by Thietmar and Bruno was fought on June 24<sup>th</sup> 972<sup>19</sup>.

Hodon's troops were marching north, from the ford on the Oder River towards Cedynia. North of the route there were impenetrable marshlands and swamps. In the south-east there were hills with ravines. And the road to the stronghold ran through a narrow defile flanked by quite steep slopes. Thus in case of an attack, the terrain made it impossible to spread out the marching columns of soldiers into lines. The troops could not be arrayed against the enemy and no operations could be carried out on the flanks. The Germans made two mistakes. Firstly, they should not have marched through such a narrow defile and secondly,

<sup>16</sup> *Kronika Thietmara (Thietmar's Chronicle)*, ed. M. Jedlicki, Poznań 1953, lib. II, cap. 29, pp. 88-92. Further quoted as Thietmar.

<sup>17</sup> *Monumenta Poloniae Historica*, vol. I, ed. A. Bielowski, Warszawa 1960, p. 194.

<sup>18</sup> W. Filipowia k, *Cedynia w czasach Mieszka I (Cedynia in the Times of Mieszko I)*, Szczecin 1959, pp. 58-66.

<sup>19</sup> The battle is mentioned, among others, by W. Filipowia k, *Bitwa pod Cedynią [24 VI 972r.] (The Battle of Cedynia [24th June 972])*, „Szczecin. Miesięcznik Pomorza Zachodniego”, 1958, fascicle 9, pp. 7-16; by the same author, *Cedynia...*, pp. 58-66; B. Miśkiewicz, *Studia...*, pp. 228-233; by the same author, *Wojny o zjednoczenie...*, pp. 92-96; by the same author, *Badania nad bitwą cedyńską z 972 r. (Studies of the Battle of Cedynia of 972)*, „Studia i Materiały do Historii Wojskowości”, vol. XIX, 1973, pp. 88-90; A. F. Grabski, *Bolesław Chrobry...*, pp. 36-37; T. M. Nowak, J. Wimmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45; L. Ratajczyk, *Tysiąclecie bitwy pod Cedynią i pierwszych zwycięstw oręża polskiego (The One Thousandth Anniversary of the Battle of Cedynia and the First Victories of Polish Arms)*, „Studia i Materiały do Historii Wojskowości”, vol. XVIII, 1972, pp. 3-42. (The reconstruction of the battle presented in this publication is highly controversial); K. Olejnik, *Cedynia, Niemcza, Głogów, Krzyszków*, [in:] *Dzieje narodu i państwa polskiego (The History of the Polish Nation and State)*, vol. I, Kraków 1988, pp. 37-45; L. Podhorecki, *Sławne bitwy Polaków (The Poles' famous Battles)*, Warszawa 1997, pp. 3-10.

<sup>14</sup> A. F. Grabski, *Polska sztuka wojenna...*, pp. 81 seqq.; B. Miśkiewicz, *Pierwsze walki...*, pp. 17 seqq.; by the same author, *Wojny o zjednoczenie...*, pp. 90-99; A. Nadolski, *Polskie siły zbrojne...*, pp. 206 seqq.

<sup>15</sup> Cf.: G. Labuda, *Studia nad początkami...*, pp. 124-125.

Hodon ought to have sent a detachment to reconnoiter the enemy position. It seems that they did not expect the Polish troops to bar their way and make them fight a battle in such unfavourable conditions. Mieszko must have known the route quite well. He may have sent some reconnoitering detachments, chosen a good site and waited, ready for battle.

There is no information about the strength of the armies. Hodon could not have commanded a very numerous army, because he had at his disposal only his own forces and the warriors led by Count Sigfrid. The margrave's army, which consisted of mounted warriors, infantrymen and wagons, may have been two thousand strong. Similarly, one does not know exactly how large Mieszko's army was. The Polish troops were probably slightly stronger than the German ones, which was a result of the fact that the armed conflict took place on Polish territory and Poland was in a better position to mobilize its forces. It might be assumed that the Polish duke's army was as numerous as it had been during the conflict with Wichman, that is to say, it was about two or three thousand strong. It consisted of both infantrymen and men on horseback.

According to the battle plan prepared by Mieszko, the troops were to be divided into three groups. The first one, which may have been quite small, was to defend the ford on the Oder River, reconnoiter the enemy's plans and intentions and then, retreating alongside the route in the direction of the stronghold, ambush Hodon's troops. Another group, led by Czcibor (Mieszko's brother), were positioned on the hills south-west of the road and could not be seen by the enemy. They were to cut off Hodon's troops, attack him from the rear and make the decisive assault. The third group waited near the stronghold. Their task was to launch a frontal assault while Czcibor's group were encircling them at the rear. Mieszko wanted to surround the Germans by a ring of his troops. Hodon could not retreat towards the west, because marshlands and swamps blocked the path. The plan was very good. The duke made use of the terrain and employed a move similar to the one he had used in the battle with Wichman in 967. No wonder Saint Bruno of Querfurt wrote: „dux ... Misico arte vicit”<sup>20</sup>.

Everything went according to plan. On crossing the Oder River the German troops encountered the first Polish detachment, which might have been led by Mieszko I. After a short fight, the Poles retreated towards a narrow isthmus between the marshland and the hills in the north-east. Thietmar mentions the incident, calling it Hodon's victory<sup>21</sup>. It seems that the margrave forced the Polish troops to withdraw and headed for the stronghold of Cedynia without changing his battle formation. Then the infantrymen and mounted warriors commanded by Czcibor attacked the Germans from the hills lying on the right, unnoticed by the enemy. Czcibor cut off Hodon's soldiers at the rear and on the right flank. Simultaneously, the group of warriors positioned near the stronghold struck. As a result Hodon's army

was encircled and easily defeated. However, Hodon and Count Sigfrid managed to flee the battlefield.

The course of events at the Battle of Cedynia suggests that Mieszko I had a talent for commanding (which the duke had already manifested in 967). He knew how to make the enemy fight a battle in highly unfavourable conditions, make use of the terrain and skillfully manoeuvre his troops. Although according to Thietmar the victorious commander was Czcibor, it was Mieszko I and not his brother who won the first victory. Czcibor played an important part in defeating the Germans, but Duke Mieszko I commanded the whole army and controlled the fighting.

On learning about the defeat, the Emperor Otto I sent messengers to Hodon and Mieszko, promising to examine the case himself. He warned them to keep peace unless they wanted to lose his favour<sup>22</sup>. In 973, at Easter, Otto arrived in Kwedlinburg, where many German magnates and envoys sent by the rulers of some neighbouring countries met. It seems that Mieszko was not present at the meeting. His son Bolesław came to Kwedlinburg as a hostage<sup>23</sup>. Therefore the emperor must have dealt with the controversial issue earlier. The emperor must have ruled in Hodon's favour as the margrave did not suffer any consequences. Otto did not trust Mieszko any more and demanded that the Polish duke send his son to his court as a guarantee of obedience<sup>24</sup>.

Otto I died in May 973. His son, Otto II, who had been crowned Holy Roman emperor during his father's lifetime, had difficulty seizing power in Germany. His main opponent was Henry II the Quarrelsome, duke of Bavaria, who was backed by Mieszko I. Finally, Otto put on the crown and began to militarily suppress his enemy's supporters.

At the end of the year 979 Otto II set off on an expedition against Mieszko I. Unfortunately, little is known about this armed conflict. A mention found in *Gesta Pontificum Cameracensium* says: „Siguidem imperator a finibus sui regni procul remotus, super Sclavones, quos adversum ierat expugnandos morabatur ... Iam vero brumalis intemperiei pruinis incumbentibus, imperator revocata manu a bello, ad villam Polidam (i.e. Pöhlde), propriam videlicet sedem, in natale Domini est reversus”<sup>25</sup>.

It seems that the Slavs mentioned in the source are Poles. This assumption is supported by Thietmar's opinion that Mieszko I's marriage of 980 to Oda, a nun of Kalba, the daughter of Theodoric, was reluctantly approved of in Germany but sanctioned „sed propter salutem patriae et corroboracionem pacis”<sup>26</sup>. Little information can be found about the campaign. It was undoubtedly very inconvenient for the emperor, who had to shamefully retreat because

<sup>22</sup> *ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> G. L a b u d a, *Materiały...*, p. 205; A.F. G r a b s k i, *Bolesław Chrobry...*, p. 38.

<sup>24</sup> G. L a b u d a, *Studia...*, pp. 325-351.

<sup>25</sup> *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores*, vol. VII, Hannoverae 1846, pp. 442-443.

<sup>26</sup> Thietmar, lib. IV, cap. 57, p. 222.

<sup>20</sup> See note 17.

<sup>21</sup> Thietmar, lib. II, cap. 29, p. 92.

of the autumn rains. The weather could not have been the only cause of Otto I decision. He may have encountered stiff resistance as soon as the forces had crossed the border. The emperor's troops suffered heavy losses, which was probably a result of battles won by the Poles. Besides, it should be remembered that in 980 many German prisoners of war, captured by Mieszko I during the armed conflict of 979, were released from captivity in Poland<sup>27</sup>.

The events of 979 are the last Polish-German armed conflicts that broke out in the time of Mieszko I and are mentioned in written sources. But the Polish duke did not stop being involved with German affairs. During the power struggle in Germany he eventually backed the underage Otto III. In 986 Polish forces took part in a war with the Polabs which was staged in retaliation for the tribes' anti-German rebellion. Mieszko's participation in this conflict seems to suggest that the Polish duke wanted to weaken the position of the Polabs, who threatened Poland's domination over Pomerania. After the war of 986 the Germans made other expeditions against the Polabs. Mieszko took part in the campaign of 991. He laid siege to Slavic Brani-bor, which he finally captured.

*Translated by Zuzanna Poklewska-Parra*

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<sup>27</sup> Thietmar, lib. IV, cap. 57, p. 223.