

# REVIEWS

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Michał Gierke, *Geneza i rozwój miast Nowej Marchii do połowy XIV wieku. Przestrzeń – społeczeństwo – kultura* [The Origin and Development of Neumark Towns until the Mid-Fourteenth Century. Space – Society – Culture], Szczecin, 2024, Książnica Pomorska, 225 pp.

At times, the history of the lands that once formed Neumark may seem like a neglected area in Polish Medieval studies. Although this is far from true, one cannot deny that the fate of this part of present-day Poland is more difficult to incorporate into the historical narrative than that of its neighbours, Western Pomerania and, in particular, Silesia. Straddling the border may be the culprit: after the Piast dynasty lost these borderlands in the thirteenth century, they witnessed severe turbulence in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Moreover, no neighbouring political power viewed this territory as a centre of its administrative or commercial power. Nevertheless, it was this very region, as well as Silesia and Western Pomerania, that were the first lands east of the Oder to witness the beginnings of town chartering.

The book by Michał Gierke focuses on urban development in this briefly discussed area. The publication is the outcome of the Author's PhD studies at the University of Szczecin, which were completed in 2021 after a successful PhD dissertation defence. The reviewed title comprises an introduction, three parts addressing selected issues, a conclusion, a bibliography, a personal-geographical index, lists of figures and tables, and abstracts in both German and English.

In the introduction, the Author outlined the state of the art of research on the history of medieval Neumark towns, and presented the purpose, subject and scope of the book. Michał Gierke intended to present “a new approach to the genesis and early development of the medieval towns of Neumark” (p. 15). The Author's analysis covered a total of 21 medieval Neumark localities. As for the analysed time, Gierke adopted the middle of the fourteenth century as its declarative end. By that time, argues the Author, a stable urban network had consolidated in Neumark, while towns strengthened their position under the Wittelsbachs and during the 1348–1350 civil war against False Valdemar. The Author proceeds to discuss the source base and outline the structure of his book.

As the Author states in the introduction, his interest is limited to “only those [towns] whose functioning was regulated by municipal law and where

local government bodies had been developed, the latter unanimously believed to constitute one of the most salient achievements of medieval urbanisation" (p. 16). Centres described by the researcher as "having urban character" fall beyond the scope of analysis. One ought to assume that this is a reference to localities which "to some extent served their immediate surroundings as economic hubs, and sometimes had a makeshift local government" (p. 16). The Author excluded ten of the listed centres, which he referred to as either quasi-urban settlements (according to his classification: Boleszkowice, Danków, Korytowo, Osieczno, Santok) or private towns (Cedynia, Drawno, Drezdenko, Golenice, Złocieniec).

Frankly, I must admit this decision has raised my doubts. The Author refrained from providing a broader explanation to pinpoint which quasi-urban settlement features led to exclusion from the analysis. A closer, slightly exegetic reading paves the way for concluding that the Author perceived such quasi-urban centres as purely commercial (market) settlements (pp. 142, 171). In my opinion, depicting urbanisation processes in their entirety requires an analysis of the towns listed by the Author. Upon chartering, it is difficult to predict whether a newly established town will develop as planned, or whether perhaps it will make use of emerging opportunities offered by various factors: human (owners, rulers), infrastructural (roads, trade routes) and environmental (rivers, presence of soils conducive to settlement). Showcasing any discrepancies identified between the models of chartering and development of royal, knightly and church-established urban centres would enrich the thematic scope of the reviewed book. It remains uncertain to me why the Author excluded private towns from the scope of his publication. Based on the literature of the subject, it is possible to ascertain that references to the town of Cedynia date back to 1299, councillors were mentioned in 1344, while a 1346 source takes note of a *sołtys* (village bailiff or mayor, Latin: *scultetus*) and lay judges. Edward Rymar surmised that Chojna was Cedynia's appellate town. The Author himself turns to the example of Cedynia to discuss the tests performed on human remains found in a thirteenth-century cemetery (pp. 123, 138). Drezdenko was also referred to as a town in 1317 and 1347. Similarly, Złocieniec became a town by 1333 at the latest. The owners of Złocieniec re-chartered the town under Brandenburg law. Sources dating to the same year mention councillors and a mayor in 1401. Since the 1330s, and practically until the early 1600s, the term *opidum* or its equivalents was used to describe Golenice. The small and underdeveloped Boleszkowice were referred to as a town or a small town (and, still in the fourteenth century, a *villa forensis*!). However, there are early fifteenth-century mentions of a local fair.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Andrzej Wędzki, 'Drezdenko', in Zbigniew Kaczmarczyk and Andrzej Wędzki (eds), *Studia nad początkami i rozplanowaniem miast nad środkową Odrą i Dolną Wartą (województwo zielonogórskie)*, vol. 1: *Ziemia lubuska, Nowa Marchia, Wielkopolska* (Zielona

Was the exclusion of private and quasi-urban towns motivated by greater subordination to owners than that of towns with royal patronage? Even in royal towns, such as Kostrzyn on the Oder, higher-level courts were governed by the ruler and his representatives, while townspeople were called before *sołtys* courts up to the 1380s.<sup>2</sup> The Author himself discusses several centres (Barnówko, Czelin, Ińsko, Kalisz, Świdwin) which failed to secure a high degree of independence in the fourteenth century and were mediated by subordinating them to the local knighthood (pp. 163–4). This begs the question: how were Barnówko, Czelin, Ińsko, Kalisz and Świdwin different from Cedynia, Drawno, Drezdenko, Golenice, and Złocieniec?

The Author consistently refers to the analysed centres as *new-type towns*. By using this term, Michał Gierke intends to introduce a conceptual range broader than that of other notions used in literature, such as *chartered* or *communal town*. The Author links this term to the innovativeness of new-type towns and their distinctiveness from other urban centres (p. 16). These are very general statements. Chartered towns were an innovation which differed from all other localities not only in urban space development but also in political governance (introduction of a municipal government, though still to varying degrees subordinate to the town owner) and cultural transformation (rulers brought colonists with a strange, or at least distinctively different material culture). I would thus refrain from construing the term *chartered town* as different solely regarding spatial layout, even if it was more regular – as I infer, this is the heart of the difference between the Author's terminology and the term well-established in Polish historiography. Moreover, the Author abstains from using the term *old-type town*, and refers to all centres bearing typical town features (e.g. more densely developed or with a higher number of craftspeople) as *early urban centres* (pp. 23, 27–9, 42, 79, distinction made clear particularly on p. 67). The Author may possibly be referring to pre-charter settlements established under German market law (pp. 51, 105, and specifically: pp. 142, 171, 175, where the differentiation between a *new-type town* and a *market settlement* is most striking). However, elsewhere, Gierke notes that the basic condition for “a new-type town to function was being

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Góra, 1967), 166, 168; Edward Rymar, ‘Cedynia jako ośrodek administracyjny (XII–XIII w.) i miejski (XIII–XVI w.)’, in Paweł Migdański (ed.), *Cedynia i okolice poprzez wieki* (Chojna–Szczecin, 2013), 118–20; Edward Rymar, *Słownik historyczny Nowej Marchii w średniowieczu*, vol. 2: *Ziemie chojeńska, mieszkowicka, trzcicka i kostrzyńska* (Chojna – Wodzisław Śląski, 2016), 16–17; *id.*, *Słownik*, vol. 3: *Ziemie lipiańska, myśliborska, golenicka, gorzowska, pelczycka* (Chojna – Wodzisław Śląski – Myślibórz – Gorzów Wielkopolski, 2020), 51–2; *id.*, *Słownik*, vol. 5: *Ziemie drawska, świnińska, złocienicka, kaliska, ‘duży i mały pazur’ (ziemia Ińska)* (Chojna – Wodzisław Śląski – Drawsko Pomorskie, 2017), 163–5.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*, *Słownik*, vol. 2, 123, 125.

granted a market right”, which enabled free trading not just at fairs. Another element added by the Author to the term he champions is that in *new-type towns*, the prerogatives to govern the commune and judiciary were transferred from the hereditary *soltys* to municipal communes (p. 110). Elsewhere, the reader learns that *new-type towns* fulfilled a variety of central functions for their immediate surroundings (p. 172). Stretching the term slightly, the Author seems to use a *new-type town* not as a synonym for chartered town (although, to my mind, such is the intention on p. 141), but to introduce a new terminological quality. Should the reader be provided with a clear explanation of how the Author understands the proposed and used term, perhaps the above reflections would not be necessary.<sup>3</sup>

The first part of the book explores the process of chartering Neumark towns. This section has been split up into several chapters. The first chapter discusses the pre-chartering settlement situation. The Author points to a scarcity of information about settlement coverage in the analysed area, and indicates rather a pattern of isolated larger settlements clustered around a few gords. In the second chapter of this section, Gierke provides a timeline of the chartering process and specifies which entities bore responsibility for establishing towns under German law. The Author does not limit his attempts to summarising the state of the art about the beginnings of the centres he intends to discuss. Gierke also puts forward his own proposals, which result in carrying the town charter dates back by more than ten or even several dozen years. This approach may raise some doubts. Let me leave detailed analyses of these proposals to historians better versed in Neumark, and limit myself to expressing appreciation for Gierke’s creativity. It ought to be noted, however, that these conclusions are, to a considerable extent, either hypothetical or drawn by analogy. In some cases, the Author builds on a hypothesis to present further hypothetical conclusions. To a substantial degree, these conclusions follow from the contents of the sources, rather than from the historiographical views that have emerged over the past hundred years. The Author frequently chooses to argue against the latter. The book almost completely fails to touch upon town back-up facilities and any colonisation progress in the settlement vicinity. Admittedly, Gierke does mention an increase in settlement quantity leading up to 1337 by invoking the example of former Cedynia lands (despite having excluded Cedynia from his analysis) (pp. 168–69, merely as an *exemplum* in the conclusion). While the Author embarked on an attempt to determine the settlement context related to gords and proto-urban settlements, he presents chartered towns as centres situated in a nameless void. The last chapter aims to investigate the

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed description, see Michał Gierke, ‘Średniowieczne miasta nowego typu’, *Przegląd Uniwersytecki*, 4–6 (2018), 9–11.

relationships between chartered towns and the existing settlement patterns in the immediate vicinity of newly established centres. Gierke argues for revising the assumption that chartered towns evolved from gord suburbs or Slavic settlements. The Author claims that nearly half of the analysed towns could have been chartered in an undeveloped area (*in cruda radice*), and only five emerged near state or knightly gords. The only fact that may be somewhat contentious is that the Author recognises *villae forenses* as units next to which towns were chartered. Numerous studies demonstrate that settlements bearing such names in twelfth- and thirteenth-century sources constituted the first step in the process of urban centre formation.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this differentiation and separation of chartered town space from market settlements follows from an observed absence of archaeological traces that would point to earlier settlement. After all, the Author mentions towns springing up next to these settlements (p. 79). As he proceeds to carry out a more thorough analysis, however, Gierke classifies them as later urban layouts, which had sometimes absorbed neighbouring areas once occupied by markets.

Part B elaborates on the urban space of chartered towns. When discussing the most frequent urban layouts, the Author uses the retrogressive method to analyse the more accurate images of specific towns from the seventeenth to the nineteenth, and even the twentieth centuries. The Author notes that the most frequent surface area of a chartered settlement located within town walls was about 16 ha, with varying market square sizes. A surface area of 16 hectares roughly corresponds to one Pomeranian *lan* (Ger. *Lahn*; Lat. *laneus*) or a later unit of measurement, one Myślubórz *lan* (pp. 86–7). Gierke argues that the market street formed the central axis of Neumark towns. Two additional streets ran parallel to the market artery, intersecting it at several cross streets (p. 90). The Author also discussed cases where a chartered town area was expanded. I once again refrain from delving into the details behind the researcher's proposals and limit myself to highlighting that, in line with his interpretation, the urban layout of Drawsko was atypical. Were one to adopt the proposed approach, Drawsko would constitute the only Neumark town with a river passing through its urban layout, which would be atypical not just in the context of the area's standards. Further on in Part B, Gierke describes elements of urban space: from the town walls encircling it, to typical urban objects like a market square, a town hall, and a parish church. The Author assumes that any differences in market square dimensions (calculated based on cartographic materials from Early Modern and Modern periods) appeared due to the gradual shrinking of main market squares or the encroachment of buildings onto market space, which over

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<sup>4</sup> Sławomir Gawlas, *O kształt zjednoczonego Królestwa. Niemieckie władztwo terytorialne a geneza społeczno-ustrojowej odrębności Polski* (Warszawa, 2000), 28–9, 88–9.

time led to the emergence of small “partial mid-market quarters” (p. 112). Written sources mention that town halls appeared later, from the perspective of the selected period, and date back to the fifteenth century. Thus it is worth taking a closer look at the outcomes of the archaeological excavations at the town halls in Chojna and Trzcińsko, which revealed that some facilities had been constructed in the fourteenth century and expanded afterwards. Parish churches generally occupied a separate block adjacent to the market square. In the fragment on the parish church timeline, the Author enumerated the differences between earliest church structures, which first involved granite, and later brick structures. Afterwards, Gierke discusses the locations of Dominican, Franciscan, and Hermits of Saint Augustine monasteries and monastery churches, which always sat on the verge of a chartered settlement. The first hospitals (in Myślibórz, Choszczno, and Chojna) were also erected on the outskirts of towns. It was not until later that, in other urban centres, hospitals were pushed beyond town limits. Gierke proceeds to briefly discuss the only written reference to the dimensions of a burgher plot recorded in 1326 in Myślibórz, and provides a more detailed analysis of the archaeological findings from several plots in Choszczno, Gorzów Wielkopolski and Rzeczn.

The final part of the book focuses on the urban community and its material culture. The Author is cautious about the earlier, unilateral assumptions of mainly German historiography that the new towns had been inhabited mainly by ethnically German settlers. Still, the Author does admit that most probably town elites spoke German, and certainly had German or Germanised names and surnames. When discussing *Kietze* (defined in literature as either ancillary settlements situated close to gords, settlement features from the German colonisation period, or locations where Slavs were settled after being conquered by German rulers), the Author refers to the second concept. Gierke considers *Kietze* to be “bottom-up [...] settlements of the native population, which was Germanised over time” (p. 142). The Author’s final remark is that the only ethnos identifiable in the sources is the Jewish one (p. 142). Owing to the absence of suitable sources, two paragraphs suffice to accommodate the process of estimating urban population size. The historian provided a hypothetical estimate of the possible urban population at the beginning of the fourteenth century, which he based on a comparison with Chojna’s population (calculated by other authors elsewhere) as of the end of the sixteenth century. The estimate is based on the fertility rate, and correlates the resulting data (1,500–1,700 residents in Chojna, Myślibórz, and Choszczno) with the surface area of the remaining towns, which constitutes a percentage of the surface area of the three above urban centres (p. 145). Next, the Author proceeds to discuss material culture findings, pointing to different clay pot forms dated before and after the breakthrough in chartering. Another issue touched upon by the Author is town law, its type (Madgeburg or Branderburg), urban authority structures and the number

of their members. The Author takes relatively long to reflect on the activity performed by margraves and towns alike, consisting of lifting economic burdens and transferring the powers of *soltys* to town councils. Here, I would only pose the question whether these reflections provide a sufficient basis for stating that towns were truly becoming independent of territorial authorities, or whether they were only making use of political upheaval to pursue mainly economic objectives.

The closing section extends beyond a mere summary of the conclusions and hypotheses presented by the Author in the three parts of the book. Apart from the (too) brief indication of rural colonisation progress in former Cedynia lands, Gierke strives to compare the situation of the part of Neumark located east of the Oder with the urban trends of Altmark and chartering activity of Pomeranian dukes. The ensuing comparison proves to be very general. It seems that it would be worth taking a closer look at the chartering towns' processes in the listed areas and in other places, which would provide valuable content for comparison, e.g. Silesia and Greater Poland. Further into the conclusion, the Author underlines the importance of towns in Ascanian politics, particularly in the political and economic activities associated with capturing new territories. It is all the more regrettable that the part of the book devoted to economic and settlement matters has not been presented more thoroughly. The final section ends with a summary of Gierke's conclusions, mainly from Parts B and C, and research postulates.

The book contains the classic features indispensable to a scientific monograph (bibliography, abbreviations, indexes), which have been duly drafted. I wish to draw attention to the list of figures. The book contains 37 figures. Throughout the publication, the Author fails to provide information on the origin, source and author of the presented images. Such information is not offered elsewhere, but rather in the list of figures enclosed at the end of the book (pp. 213–15).

Generally, the book's language is easy to understand. Sometimes, however, when the Author attempts to link his hypotheses with other hypotheses the narrative becomes complicated, and the grounds for his conclusions are not always clear. The Author may want to rethink overly technical terminology, e.g. replace "spatial augmentation" with a simpler option, such as "expansion" or "adjoined land". However, these choices do not affect the overall reception of the publication. Tables with summaries of basic information about the discussed urban centres help to follow the timeline of the facts explored in the book.

The book has many significant merits. The Author collected data on mentions about urban settlements in the former Neumark lands in the analysed period. Wherever he believes it is justified, Michał Gierke does not shy away from questioning the current findings of Polish and German historiography. It is worth noting that he does so relatively frequently, especially when calling

for earlier dating of numerous chartered towns than has generally been agreed upon. I presume that scholars better versed in this area will engage in a discussion with the Author's proposals. Gierke aptly juxtaposes classic historical techniques with archaeological findings from the historical towns of former Neumark. Some conclusions and hypotheses are grounded in the outcomes of archaeological excavations, not in sources. The Author thus successfully demonstrates that urban archaeology can lead to new interpretations of urban beginnings and bridge the gaps in written sources. Indeed, if early chartered town scholars wish to free themselves of the confines of known sources and historiographic materials, their options are gradually shrinking, and they have to adopt the approach exemplified by the Author.

One of the book's strengths – drawing new conclusions and putting forward new hypotheses – can also be considered its weakness. At times, the hypothetical nature of the Author's observation cripples any counterarguments based on more or less certain proofs. Again, this trait is characteristic of medieval studies. The question remains, how far should one venture with hypothesis-based findings? My remaining doubts were previously expressed in the review. Let me only reiterate that I believe the book's most significant flaw is the failure to include quasi-urban centres and private towns (as referred to by the Author) in the conducted analyses. Taking these settlements into account would allow for a more precise depiction of Neumark's urbanisation up to the mid-fourteenth century.

It seems that no one has ever succeeded in publishing a book that suits all tastes. Michał Gierke's work is made up of both persuasive and faulty fragments. Still, I believe that the strengths outweigh the weaknesses. Therefore, I recommend this title to all readers whose interests involve not just Neumark, but also more general and broader aspects of how the lands which now form present-day Poland were urbanised. I also hope that the book will serve as a stimulus to strengthen the bonds between urban archaeology and history, and will inspire more researchers of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century urbanity to combine the methods and findings of these two disciplines.

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