

---

SOBIESŁAW SZYBKOWSKI\*

---

## JANUSZ BIENIAK (1927–2025)

---

On Monday 28 July 2025 the Nestor of Polish Medieval Studies, Professor dr hab. Janusz Bieniak died at the age of 96. Professor Bieniak was born in Warsaw on 1 October 1927. After finishing school, he studied History at the Mikołaj Kopernik University of Toruń between 1946 and 1951. His supervisor was Professor Bronisław Włodarski, a representative of the academic world of Lwów (Lviv) who specialized in medieval history, especially relations between Poland and Bohemia and Poland and Rus', and the auxiliary historical disciplines. Włodarski shaped Bieniak's research interests. However, Bieniak did not have the chance to work in his alma mater immediately after completing his history studies; he would gain a post in Toruń only in 1958. There under the supervision of Professor Włodarski he completed his dissertation on the State of Miećław, for which he obtained his doctorate in 1960. This opus devoted to the crisis in eleventh-century Piast Poland, for which the source evidence is particularly sparse, appeared in book form in 1963 as *Państwo Miećława. Studium analityczne* ['The State of Miećław. An Analytical Study'], with a second edition in 2010.

In this monograph the Toruń historian employed his superior analytical capabilities, thanks to which he managed to create his own convincing vision of the question which he worked to answer. Many of the

---

\* Sobiesław Szybkowski – Professor of Medieval History at the Faculty of History of the University of Gdańsk, Poland; e-mail: sobieslaw.szybkowski@ug.edu.pl; ORCID: 0000-0001-9366-8568.

hypotheses he proposed there still retain their relevance today. Janusz Bieniak's dissertation written to gain his higher doctorate (*Habilitacja*), *Wielkopolska, Kujawy, ziemie łęczycka i sieradzka wobec problemu zjednoczenia państwowego w latach 1300–1306* ['Greater Poland, Kuyavia and the Lands of Łęczyca and Sieradz with Reference to the Question of the Reunification of the Kingdom, 1300–1306'] (1969, with a second edition in 2011) also introduced much that was new to Polish medieval studies. In this work the author departed from the Marxist paradigm of the reconstruction of the political and social history of Poland in the last stages of reunification in which the main causative factors were anonymous social groups, in favour of a reconstruction of actual political parties that existed at the time, which included specific units belonging to the knightly elite. Janusz Bieniak formed his personal vision of the parties of that age, making virtuoso use of the genealogical method, at the same time as illustrating a very broad panorama of the social elite of Greater Poland and the central Polish lands. His study also gave a great impulse to a renaissance of critical and source-based genealogical research (primarily relating to late-medieval knights and gentry) in Polish medieval studies, in addition to prosopographical and archontological investigations connected with the topic. As a result of this research, the Toruń historian was a proponent of the application of the retrogressive method which led to the necessity of reliance on unpublished late-medieval sources such as the records of land courts and territorial courts of viceroys.

The author of this text believes that Bieniak then became one of the few promoters of a particular breakthrough in research of the history of the late Middle Ages in Poland, thanks to which new generations of scholars have opened up – namely that category of sources which are of basic and capital significance not only for genealogical studies but also more widely for research on the social history of late-medieval Poland. Janusz Bieniak put into effect his proposition to 'liquidate the anonymity of medieval society and replace nebulous society with a version of a concrete society' through much research on the genealogy of Polish families and knightly and gentry clans but without removing space for theoretical reflections'. The research premises he set forth became the basis of many so-called 'clan' monographs or works dealing with only certain branches of knightly/gentry clans or the only significant higher noble families. Another great achievement of the Toruń scholar was

the gathering around himself of a scholarly milieu which gave rise to the Toruń school of genealogy, which spread to other centres of medieval studies. He was also the *spiritus movens* of a general Polish group of researchers, which concentrated on this area of research. On this basis seven conferences were organized between 1980 and 2001, during which new methods of research were developed in genealogical studies.

Bieniak accomplished his research interests mainly via very assiduous studies devoted to various specific problems referring to the genealogy of particular blood-related groups, issues of methodology in genealogical research (the most incisive of these studies were published in two collections: *Polskie rycerstwo średniowieczne* ['Medieval Polish Knights'], 2002 and *Polskie rycerstwo średniowieczne. Suplement* ['Medieval Polish Knights. A Supplement'], 2005). He also published work on the twelfth-century Polish political elite (a cycle of articles published in various volumes of the journal *Spółeczeństwo Polski Średniowiecznej* ['Medieval Polish Society']). The short biographies he wrote of representatives of the knightly and gentry class are also particularly important. He published 100 entries in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*. He was also co-author of two regional catalogues of officials which appeared in the series *Urzędnicy dawnej Rzeczypospolitej XII–XVIII wieku (Urzędnicy łączyccy, sieradzcy i wieluńscy XIII–XV wieku. Spisy* ['Lists of Officials from the Lands of Łęczyca, Sieradz and Wieluń in the XIII–XV Centuries'], 1985 – together with Alicja Szymczakowa; *Urzędnicy kujawscy i dobrzyńscy XII–XV wieku. Spisy* ['Lists of Officials from the Lands of Kuyavia and Dobrzyń in the XII–XIV Centuries'], 2014 – jointly with Sobiesław Szybkowski). However, he did not shirk from source-critical investigations, of which the 2007 monograph *Najstarsze kujawskie księgi ziemskie (1397–1408): kolejność i chronologia kart* ['The Oldest Land Records of Kuyavia (1397–1408): the Order and Chronology of Foliation'] is a prime example.

In his last monograph from 2018, *Zarębowie i Nałęcz i królobójstwo w Rogoźnie* ['The House of Zaręba and Nałęcz and the Rogoźno Regicide'], Janusz Bieniak returned to the topic of the reunification of the Kingdom between the XII and XIV centuries. Let us give the last word here to the deceased's fellow worker and reviewer, Professor dr hab. Jan Tęgowski who wrote in *Zapiski Historyczne* 84.4 (2019), p. 256 that the book 'is characterized by its masterly school of scholarship and is an excellent model of source-critical analysis with its use of written sources

acknowledged to be forgeries and also its investigations in the realm of prosopography. Thanks to this publication the genealogy of two high-ranking Greater-Polish families from the period of the twelfth – fourteenth centuries has been put in order and reconstructed’.

The achievements discussed briefly here lead us to believe that the deceased was undoubtedly an extraordinarily important individual in modern Polish historical writing. Thanks to his research and organizational work, there has been a renaissance in Polish medieval studies, marked by a shift towards new principles which continues to this day and will continue into the future.