



# ARCHITECTURE AND POWER IN EARLY CENTRAL EUROPE

by

**MARTA GRACZYŃSKA**



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by  
**MARTA GRACZYŃSKA**

Translated by  
**JOANNA SOBCZAK**



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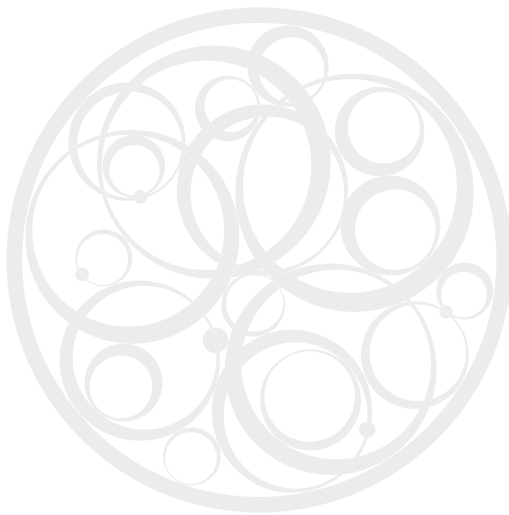
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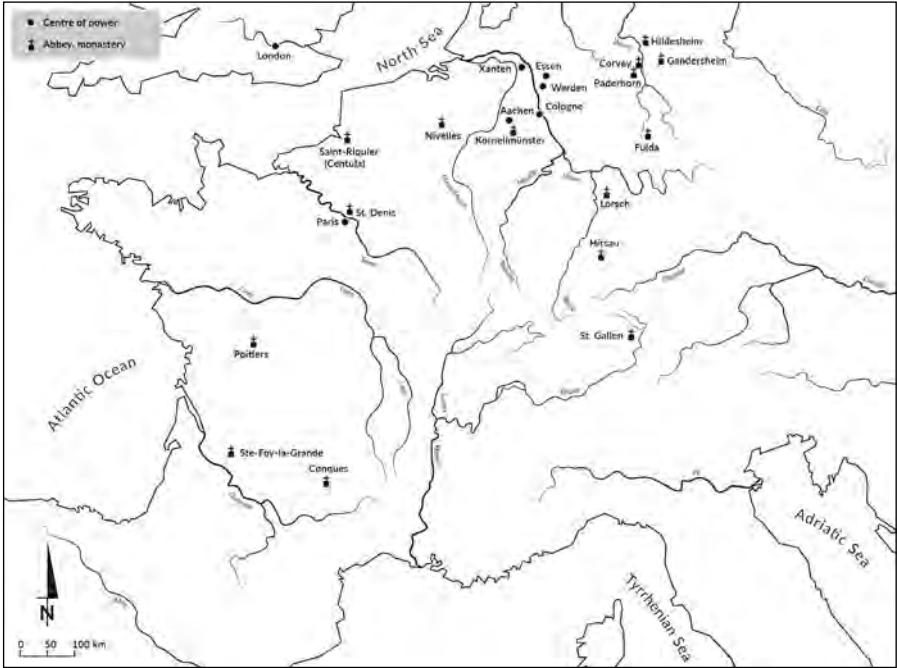
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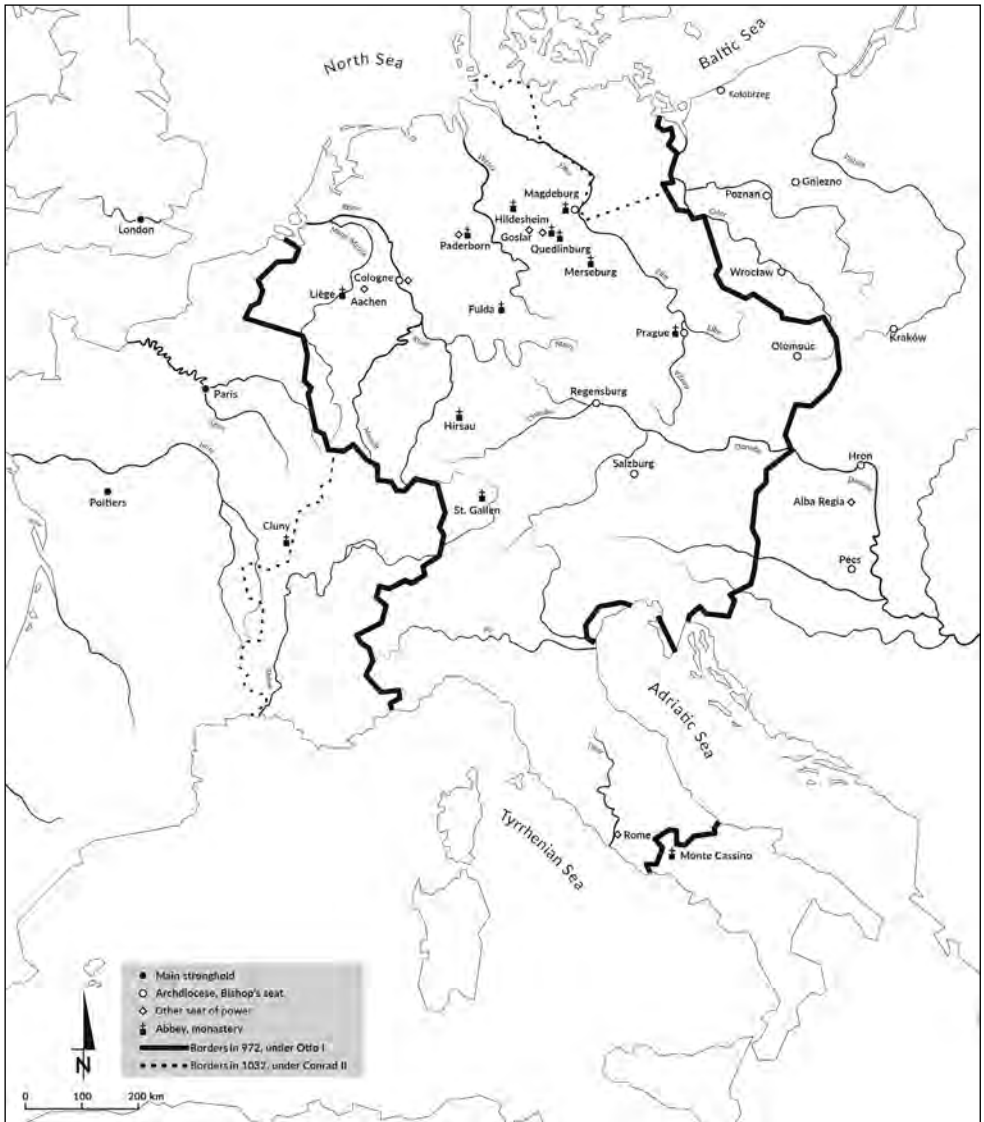




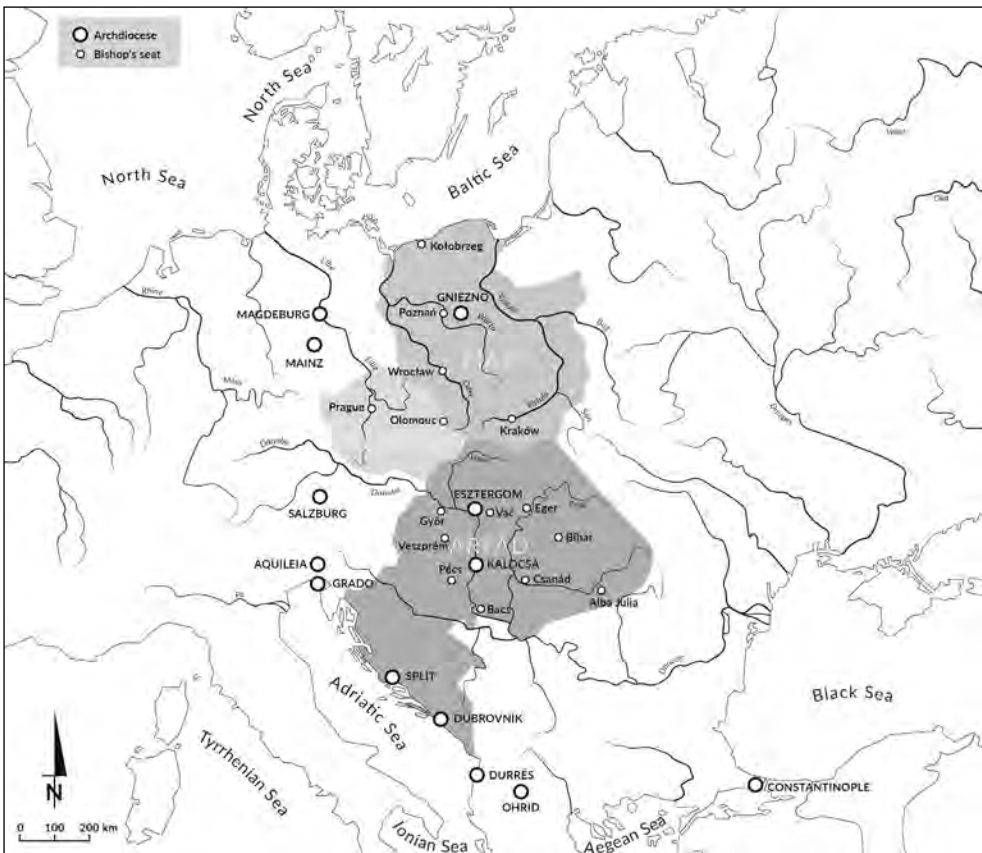
Map 1: The Carolingian Empire.



Map 2: Europe in the Eleventh Century.



Map 3: The Holy Roman Empire, ca. 1000.

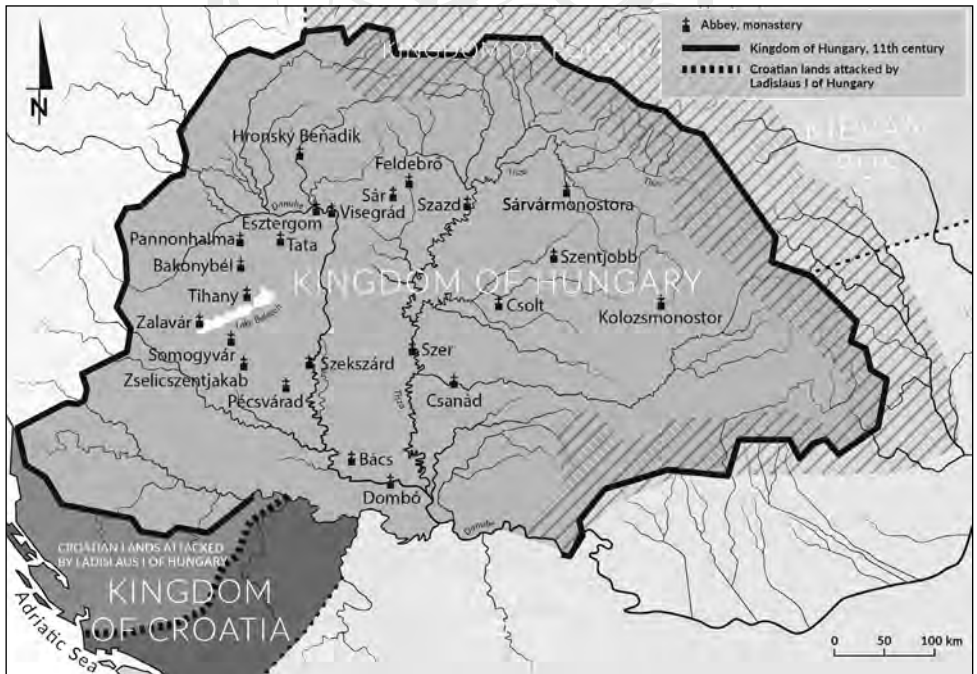


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Map 6: The Kingdom of Hungary in the Eleventh Century.

## INTRODUCTION

**THE FOCUS OF** this book is architecture and power, and the mutual relations between the two. My aim was to trace their co-existence, and how they complemented each other—by conferring significance upon one another, or accentuating each other's functions. In order to present a detailed view of the two subjects and their interconnections, I selected the seminal period between the ninth and eleventh centuries in Central Europe.

I have focused on royal power in all its grandeur, specificity, and distinctive needs. Clad in abundant ostentation and symbolism, royal power was displayed to the world in a variety of ways involving military, economic, and trade-related measures, not to mention lavish ceremonies or the choice of attire and insignia of authority. Furthermore, some occasions required a proper setting for the theatre of power to truly emerge, resound, and make an impression on its spectators and participants. By far the most enduring of all these expressions, architecture was one of the many ways of displaying power and has been a popular topic of research. On the one hand, churches and palaces were erected for utilitarian purposes as both sanctuaries and residences. Yet on the other, they offered far more, and were eagerly used to emphasize the role of their founders. Such contrivances have been known to mankind for thousands of years, and are employed until this day across the globe. The purpose of architecture is to bestow meaning, and emphasize the splendour and capacity of authority.

In order to clarify the symbolism concealed in architecture from olden days, researchers have expanded their own methodologies to include written and archaeological resources, finding themselves at the intersection of at least three fields: history, history of architecture, and archaeology. Drawing on commentaries from written sources, they can find reasons for a given building being raised, and its intention. Yet written evidence does not exist for certain parts of the world or periods of history—or if they do, they are insufficient, with archaeological relics being the only source confirming earlier human presence. Stratigraphic deposits tell the story of the length and type of human activity in a given region—whereas uncovered artefacts, including burial and building remnants, offer information on religious, economic, or trading behaviours.

From the Scandinavian Peninsula in the north to the Adriatic coastline in the south, central Europe is one such area. While its eastern and western borders were fluid, the territories located in the basins of the rivers Oder, Bug, and Tisza and in the middle course of the Danube from the tenth until the eleventh/twelfth centuries are focal to the deliberations considered in my book. Given these geographical and chronological parameters, it is no surprise to assert that the major part of this territory's history has been written in the ground rather than on paper, in ink, by human hand. Reference sources containing information on the part of Europe I am concerned with were usually not written by eyewitnesses, and produced considerably later than the events in

question—which is exactly why all data therein requires a critical eye and historical analysis.<sup>1</sup> Some of the quoted facts can be verified thanks to artefacts and relics discovered underground—notable examples include remarks on incidents in these lands during the ninth and tenth centuries. Such records include accounts of rulers of the Piast, Přemyslid, and Árpád dynasties embracing Christianity. While quoting the years of specific events, chroniclers frequently failed to mention exact locations or personal details of individuals attending particular ceremonies—often such information was only confirmed in much later records. Archaeological findings can confirm such events as well. The use of dating methods drawn from archaeology allows the two types of sources to be combined. In this way, written and material evidence can complement and support each other. This is how the baptism in 966 of Mieszko, the Piast duke of Poland, can be tied to the building of a brick residential building, with a church included, on Ostrów Lednicki island.

When selecting the territory I intended to analyze—the geographical boundaries and chronology, considering the availability of written and archaeological evidence—I captured a number of common denominators. These included three characteristic features: limited influence of the Roman Empire; similarities in policies in relation to their powerful neighbours; and the comparability of political, social, and cultural developments.

Consequently, almost the entire area I have selected as my field of focus was located beyond the borders and influence of the ancient Roman Empire. Even where corners of the Empire reached into the barbarian kingdoms—such as the Imperial border extending along the lower course of the Danube—mutual influence was virtually non-existent. With regard to this, one should absolutely ignore the few, dispersed artefacts or numismatic findings; their presence only suggests trade exchange between these territories. Had the lands I am describing actually been inspired by ancient heritage, space would have been planned to the Roman design: urban residential quarters would have been arranged within a regular geometric street grid with two main centrelines (the north to south *cardo* and the east–west *decumanus* axes); ancient plans and patterns would have been applied in the design of individual dwellings; settlements and districts would have been organized to Roman paradigms; at the very least, these lands would have been infiltrated with ancient polytheism with its array of characteristics, such as burial specificities. None of these—and no derivatives—have been ever discovered locally.

Other features typical for the entire territory include its being wedged between two enormous centres of political and religious supremacy which had evolved west of the River Oder and east of the Bug between the fifth and ninth centuries, their power discharged by the King of Germany in the west, and the Byzantine Emperor (*basileus*), inheritor of the Roman imperial ideal, in the east.<sup>2</sup> Like any politically forceful organ-

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1 Consider the respective accounts by the Benedictine monk of Brauweiler and Gallus Anonymus regarding Richeza of Lotharingia and her story, both narratives of which have been recently compiled and described by Małgorzata Delimata-Proch, *Rycheza Królowa Polski (ok. 995–21 marca 1063): Studium Historiograficzne* (Kraków: Avalon, 2019).

2 Stefan Burkhardt, “Between Empires: South-Eastern Europe and the Two Roman Empires in the Middle Ages,” in *Medieval East Central Europe in a Comparative Perspective*, ed. Jaritz and Szende,

ism, both attempted to expand the reach of their influence as far as possible onto lands with which they bordered—the territory I am describing here. Assorted chronicles and other written sources contain extensive descriptions of such endeavours. How did the rulers of the regions handle the situation—were they successful in managing such a difficult neighbourhood? They had two options: fragile co-existence or collaboration; or instead joining a coalition or an antagonistic party. Written evidence and archaeological findings tell us that until the ninth century, the interest of the German king and the *basileus* in these territories had been somewhat sporadic, any exchanges based chiefly on trade rather than political pressure. Yet from the mid-ninth century onwards, contacts were much more intense, becoming military, religious, and cultural in nature. This was a time when the names of lands and the rulers of Slavic, Bohemian, Moravian, and Magyar tribes began appearing more and more frequently in German and Byzantine written chronicles. Formerly attracting little or no interest, territories between the Rivers Oder and Bug morphed into objects of desire for these crowned Christian monarchs keen on finding ways to influence the interior affairs of their neighbours. This was primarily due to the obvious developments which had taken place among these tribes. Their most powerful leaders had consolidated power and strived to centralize it, changing what had been familial group-based forms of governance. Having seized all authority in their respective lands, the most powerful tribal chieftains became rulers of specific territories supported by stable economic and political resources.<sup>3</sup>

The third and final feature (comparable political, social, and cultural developments)—more or less a true common denominator for the entire studied area—involved a very specific decision made by each of the respective local sovereigns in altering the nature of governance and the way rulers functioned by introducing extensive changes to the social system and culture, namely by the adoption of Christianity. This was a long-term transformation between the eighth/ninth and late eleventh centuries, combining the rulers' baptism and then adopting Christian values. Their decisions were made at relatively comparative points in time and assumed that privileges received in return for conversion would be rather similar.<sup>4</sup> The benefits included membership of a larger and more powerful community; yes, religious, but mainly a political one. This in turn guaranteed the elevated status of each ruler, boosting his aspirations to a royal crown; most importantly, however, it allowed him to preserve the sovereignty of the land and its independent governance. In return, certain duties had to be discharged. A Christian

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47–61; Berend et al., *Central Europe in the High Middle Ages*, 1–16; Florin Curta, *East Central and Eastern Europe in the Early Middle Ages* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 1–38; Nora Berend, “The Mirage of East Central Europe: Historical Regions in a Comparative Perspective,” in *Medieval East Central Europe in a Comparative Perspective*, ed. Jaritz and Szende, 9–24; Curta, *Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages*, 5–14.

**3** *Přemyslovci. Budování Českého Státu*, ed. Petr Sommer et al. (Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2009); *The Ancient Hungarians*, ed. Fodor; Andrzej Buko, *The Archaeology of Early Medieval Poland. Discoveries—Hypotheses—Interpretations* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

**4** Readers may wonder whether the use of the phrase “comparative points in time” is appropriate when applying to events one hundred years apart—yet one needs to bear in mind that in post-ancient Europe, perspectives of time differ from ours.

ruler was obliged to support the clergy and aid his own people in spiritual development, such as through missionary campaigns or by founding sanctuaries. In theory, this was not strange: most religions combined secular and divine rule. Yet Christianity demanded far more than usual—new principles and values were introduced.

Archaeological research suggests that prior to embracing Christianity, masonry or brick architecture had not been known or used in Central Europe, construction materials were solely wood, clay, and earth. Structures with complex plans were unknown, as were particular elements within buildings. Using and processing stone, arranging it into assorted patterns and joining masonry elements with mortar were an absolute novelty—and rulers were the only people bold enough to use them. They had to face new technologies as well as novel forms, functions, and meanings: most stone buildings from the early days of adopting Christianity were churches. Other structures—far fewer in number—were homes for the clergy and secular elites close to the court.

All three criteria applied to the dominions which would later become the Kingdom of Poland, Kingdom of Bohemia, and Kingdom of Hungary. Consequently, to highlight the interdependence of architecture and power, I have taken exemplars of churches and palaces erected between the ninth and late eleventh centuries, founded by the rulers of the Piast, Přemyslid, and Árpád dynasties. My area of interest has been the architectural forms of key foundations identified by archaeologists and art historians—my aim being to discuss them as examples of the diverse use and arrangement of space while offering the reader some comparative context. Western Europe at the time is an obvious reference-point when highlighting processes of power-related and social change. More than simply being a successor of the ancient Roman Empire, with all the cultural and social legacy that involved, Western Europe was also the creator of attitudes, models of behaviour, social needs, and forms of art. Similarities and differences between Western and Central Europe have been extensively discussed.<sup>5</sup> Yet I believe the two regions are all too often set in juxtaposition rather than as places in dialogue with each other. Each of these European areas did more than draw from its neighbour's achievements and solutions; each remained a reference point for the other.

This publication comprises two parts, differing in composition and extent. Part one is considerably more extensive, divided into subchapters and smaller textual sections; part two is much shorter and undivided into shorter sections.

In the first chapter, “Displays of Power—Architecture as Sign and Symbol,” I explore fortified strongholds as residential areas rather than on architecture itself, selecting key locations of power for the Piast, Přemyslid, and Árpád houses—seats of central authority (*sedes regni principales*). I compare their founding in the context of historical events; their geographical locations; fortification systems and spatial arrangements; and the type and purpose of the buildings. This survey attempts to answer the question whether

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**5** Jerzy Kłoczowski, *Młodsza Europa* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1998); Jerzy Kłoczowski, “Chrześcijaństwo w Europie Środkowowschodniej i Budowa Organizacji Kościelnej,” in *Ziemie Polskie w X wieku i ich Znaczenie w Kształtowaniu się nowej mapy Europy*, ed. Henryk Samsonowicz (Kraków: Universitas, 2000), 3–17; Jenő Szűcs, *Nation und Geschichte. Studien* (Budapest: Corvina Kiadó, 1981), 251; Szűcs, *Les trois Europes*.



fortified towns could be a setting for the playing out the theatre of power. If so, which elements were the most important in a fortified stronghold? Were any demarcation lines required in planning and arranging them? Did fortified strongholds feature any visible partitioning between the respective sections associated with secular and ecclesiastical authority?

The next chapter, “Choice of Architectural Forms,” explores the justification for choosing specific forms. I compare Central European architecture to exemplars developed by the Merovingians, Carolingians, Ottonians, and the Salian dynasty. To the Piasts, Přemyslids, and Árpáds, this was an obvious array of paradigms, an inspiration for architectural solutions (such as basilicas or rotundas) or individual structural components, such as massive western fronts or the elevated crypt. Sovereigns could reference a paradigm in designing structures to meet their individual needs.

I then analyze the how and why of architectural choices in “Code of Form and Shape.” In this chapter I focus on meanings concealed in forms and shapes typical for individual buildings, such as churches and palaces. Codes and connotations were also embedded in interior spatial arrangements, a theme explored in the next chapter: “Composition of Spatial Arrangements.” Interiors were composed of various forms, each assigned an individual and specific function. Space could be modified through the introduction of supplementary elements, say, by adding altar rails or burial sites (ciboria or tombs). An obvious question arises: did such components simply affirm or irreversibly and permanently transform former meanings, purpose, and functions?

“Appropriation and/or Influence,” the fifth chapter explores the question concerning sources of inspiration and how design might infiltrate. In Central Europe, buildings erected with the use of any material other than wood were usually a novelty, technologically and symbolically. This is why I wanted to learn how selected architectural exemplars came to new territories; but this gave rise to the following questions: could architectural projects designed and developed in Piast, Přemyslid, and Árpád sovereignties also influence or inspire one another? If so, what had been the original sequence of events producing such an outcome? If not, I wanted to find the underlying cause.

A peripheral motif, involving subtexts and the ensuing ideological content with which all architecture is imbued, runs throughout the first part of my deliberations. I explore the topic in greater detail in the chapter “Architecture as a Vehicle of Meanings.” I am looking for an answer to the most fundamental of all questions: can an architectural work become “scripted culture”? This question gives rise to another issue concerning culture codes: were they consciously applied, or skilfully interpreted and paraphrased by sovereigns in these “younger European” countries? The culture code question appears in the chapter “Form vs. Function,” in which I concentrate on the interdependency between the function and form of any given building, be it church or residence (*episcopium, palatium*): was the mutuality always there—and if so, how was it manifested? Did a change to the original role conferred upon an architectural scheme affect its form, but also—were formal modifications in any way important to function? The question pointed to a different approach to the theme of function. In the penultimate chapter, “Interpreting Function,” I look for additional meanings and/or functions potentially carried by or assigned to buildings. Obvious functions arising from their inherent

nature apart, could an abbey or cathedral, say, be used for other purposes? If so, could they become vehicles for other meanings?

One aspect of creating architecture seemed particularly noteworthy: my attention was drawn to a Leitmotif: the foundation pursuits of sovereigns. Could it be that monarchs of the young Piast, Přemyslid, and Árpád dynasties consciously and intentionally decided to use architecture—its form, shape, function, and meaning in particular—as a palpable sign of their authority? And can we read late eleventh-century architecture in parts of what I will call “Younger Europe” (after Jerzy Kłoczowski, for east-central Europe) as nothing but a tool of propaganda? Were architectural projects conscious time- and place-specific ideological programs overflowing with content designed to showcase power and set it in specific scenery?

My work closes with a summary of sorts, based upon an assumption that researchers may refer to architecture as a non-textual historical resource. Clearly, if architectural remains are all that we are left with, the identification of all meanings intended by builders, architects, or founding patrons becomes impossible. Dealing with missing pieces and avoiding forced interpretation, contextuality becomes fundamental to the nature of architecture and all other works of art. This is why only an extensive comparative analysis of each example discussed may give rise to and resolve most of the questions listed herein, as well as many others which shall most certainly arise in the future.

The issues and questions I explore in individual chapters of this book have been designed to showcase specific changes to the mechanics of authority in Central Europe. I hope that this will contribute to the debate concerning the ways and means the image of sovereigns and displays of power in the Middle Ages were created and developed. By adding architecture to a well explored subject, I wish to add a piece to the panoramic puzzle of medieval Christian Europe.

Given the shortage of written sources available I shall examine other evidence as far as possible. My underlying interest is on what has been termed “scripted culture”: architecture and all aspects tying in with its creation and use. Such an approach to this particular field of art will make it easier to incorporate the examples discussed here into an all-encompassing debate regarding medieval architecture, whether from the vantage point of history, archaeology, or the history of art. It will also allow an alternative approach to architecture, monuments, and buildings, all potentially interpretable as elements of the landscape and tools of propaganda.