



The Dzierzgoń River's history

Two thousand years of cultural, ethnic, political and administrative divisions

When trying to find an appropriate subject for my paper intended for an *utmark* conference, I could have chosen some examples from my experience with the Viking period and medieval Scandinavian world, for example a summary of the results achieved during the excavations in Stauran, Skånland kommune in north Norway. During two seasons of rescue excavations, in 1988 and 1989, we managed to grasp a glimpse of the spatial organisation of the direct vicinity of a farm that functioned from the late Viking period to the high Middle Ages (cf. Urbańczyk 1991, 1992:97-104 and 116-120, 2002). A sequence of ditches and indications of differentiated functions of particular areas made it possible to discern the possible limit of the *innmark*, surprisingly close to the houses (cf. maps in Urbańczyk 2002). The story of the Stauran farm could also have been presented as a series of settlement stages, where an original *utmark* of the main Steinsland farm was turned into an *innmark* of an outshoot Stauran farm and after some centuries became an *utmark* again.

Quite different was the history of the Sveigakot locality near Lake Myvatn in north-east Iceland (cf. collections of preliminary reports edited by Orri Vesteinsson 2002 and 2003). This rather marginal farming area (*ca.* 50 kilometres inland and 260 m.a.s.l.) was settled sometime before the greenish tephra layer was deposited *ca.* 950 AD. Thus, the virgin land was settled and turned into *innmark*. The site was inhabited until late twelfth century with a short break in the eleventh century. Worsening ecological circumstances due to the deteriorating climate and agricultural overexploitation caused final abandonment of the farmstead, and it became an *utmark* (a pasture) for one of the more successful farms located by the lake. Sometime later, extending soil erosion turned the area into a 'useless' stony desert that persists until today.

Still, another *utmark* story may be constructed for the coastal site of Skonsvika near Berlevåg in north-east Finnmark. People settled here during the high Middle Ages, but soon deserted their strange 'multi-room house' (cf. preliminary report in

Amundsen *et al.* 2003). Despite good grass growing conditions, the area was always an *utmark* from a standard agriculturalist point of view. After periods of marginal farming exploitation (hay collection), it has recently returned to its normal *utmark* status. Of course, the story would sound quite different if told from the position of the native Sámi people.

Yet another variation of the dynamism resulting from the interchanging presence/absence of agriculturalists may be pictured using the example of the marshy valley of the small Dzierzgoń River east of the lower Vistula. Being an obvious *utmark* for the nearby farmers during several millennia, it was steadily drained, and in the nineteenth century finally included in the *innmark* economy of several villages (cf. Kasprzycka 1999).

Faced with such a multiple-choice situation, I decided to present yet another aspect of the *utmark* areas – namely its potential for defining divisions between various socio-cultural entities. This is the story of the Dzierzgoń River in Poland that for almost two millennia played a role much more important than might be inferred from its minor size.

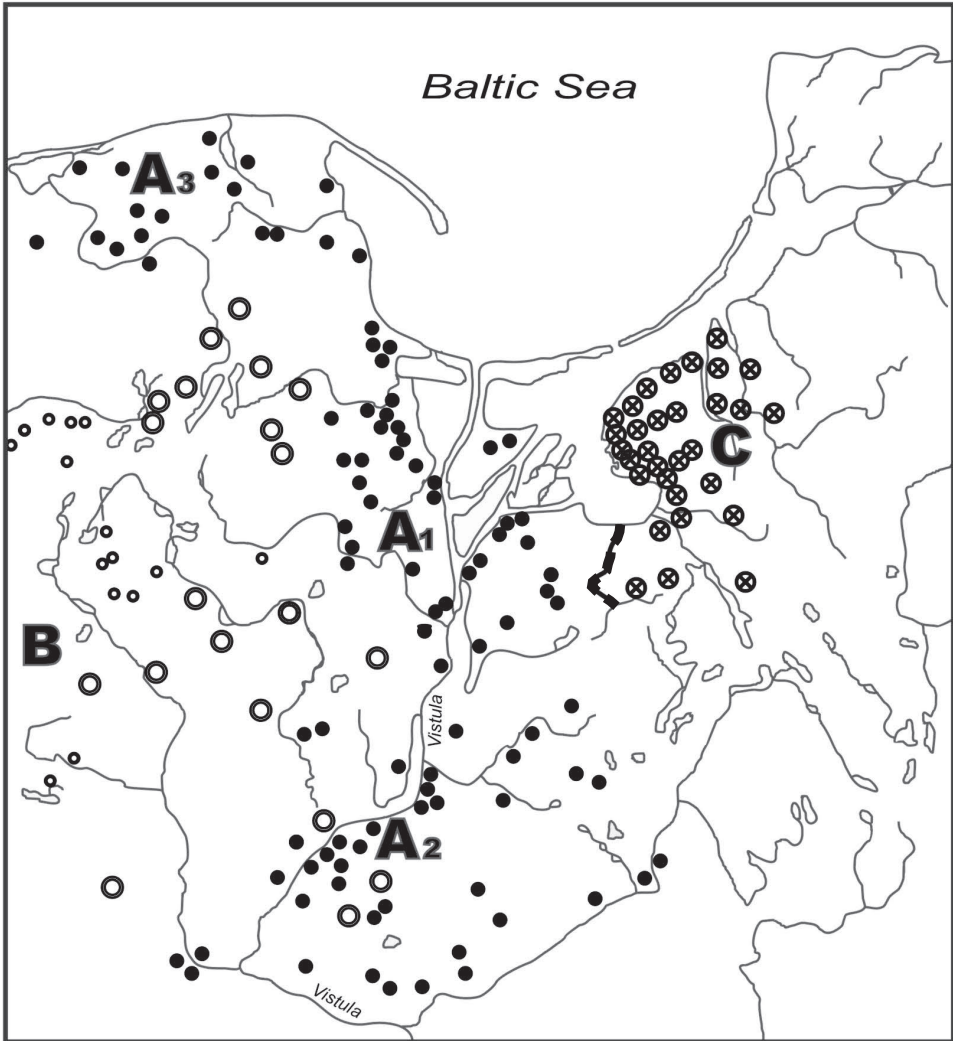
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Norway is not a good place to argue for the importance of water because it is obvious for everybody here. Being much more feasible for transport and communication, waterways have always formed spines of local settlement systems. The same is true almost everywhere, because studies of past territorial divisions show clusters of settlements concentrated by and along rivers and bays with boundaries running on the land. Only with the development of stable political organisations did large rivers become strategically important and thus useful as relatively safe boundaries. This is also a rather typical feature of many maps showing political divisions.

There are, however, some exceptions to this rule, i.e. rivers, which did not change their function and which ‘always’ made a boundary. With no respect to changing cultural, ethnic or political circumstances, they seem to form a stable borderline for territorial structures of various types. Here, I will present such an example of a very ‘stubborn’ boundary kept along the northern-Polish River Dzierzgoń. For almost two thousand years, this rather small river marks various divisions observed by archaeologists and reconstructed by historians.

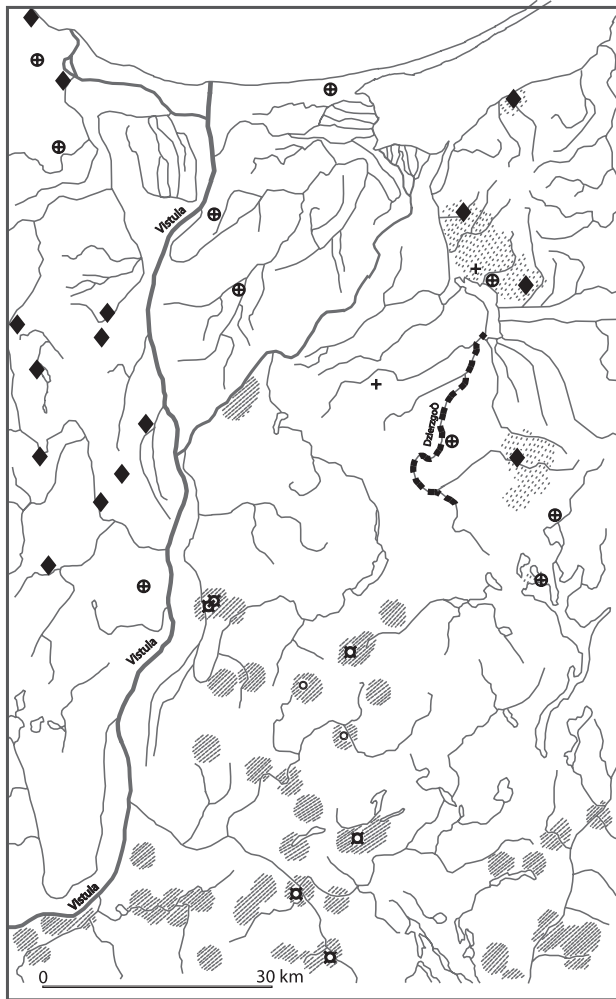
The most important tool for such a presentation are maps that visualise the problem. Thus, the following text consists of comments to the attached maps.

Until the beginning of our era the Dzierzgoń River did not seem to be of any special importance for the people who lived there. Consequently, it did not attract the attention of archaeologists who studied the area. Its renewed interest started with the emergence of the Wielbark culture, identified with the early Goths (cf. Urbańczyk 1998 and 2003). Already during the second and third centuries AD, the river formed a division between two subgroups of this dynamically developing culture (*figure 1*). However, it was not an unsurpassable border. Just the opposite, it was meant to be



- 1 ⊗ flat cemeteries (zone C)
- 2 ⊙ cemeteries with stone constructions (zone B)
- 3 ● flat cemeteries (zone A)
- 4 ○ unclassified cemeteries
- 5 - - - - - Dzierzgoń

Figure 1. After Okulicz-Kozaryn 1992a and 1992b: Fig. 1



- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| 1 - - - - - Dzierzgoń | 4 ◆ strongholds | 7 ⊕ silver deposits |
| 2 // Slavs | 5 ▣ strongholds | 8 + coins |
| 3 ● Prussians | 6 ○ strongholds | |

Figure 2. After Chudziak 1999: Fig. 1

sides (figure 2). However, the area close to the river seems to be left uninhabited. West Slavs kept their settlements in the west, i.e. near the Vistula (*Wisła*) that formed the spine of the Polish lowlands, while the Prussians preferred postglacial hills to the east.

This ethno-cultural division is confirmed by unusual evidence, namely the recorded personal report of the Benedictine monk Radim-Gaudentius, who in April 997 followed his half-brother Voitech-Adalbert who went to the Prussians with a

crossed, which is proved by an elaborate 1.3 kilometre long passage built of oak logs (Sadowska-Topór 1999).

After the alleged departure of the Goths in the first half of the third century and subsequently that of the Gepids in the second half of the third century, the area might have been largely depopulated, and we have no data which indicate any divisions on the local scale. We know, however, that migrations and substantial changes of culture continued. The most important were expansions of two ethno-cultural waves that approached the study area from opposite directions. From the south-west, the Slavs arrived, while the Balts were expanding from the north-east.

In the ninth century, both ethnic groups are clearly discernible when their characteristic material cultures approached the Dzierzgoń River (Prussian name - Sorgun) from both

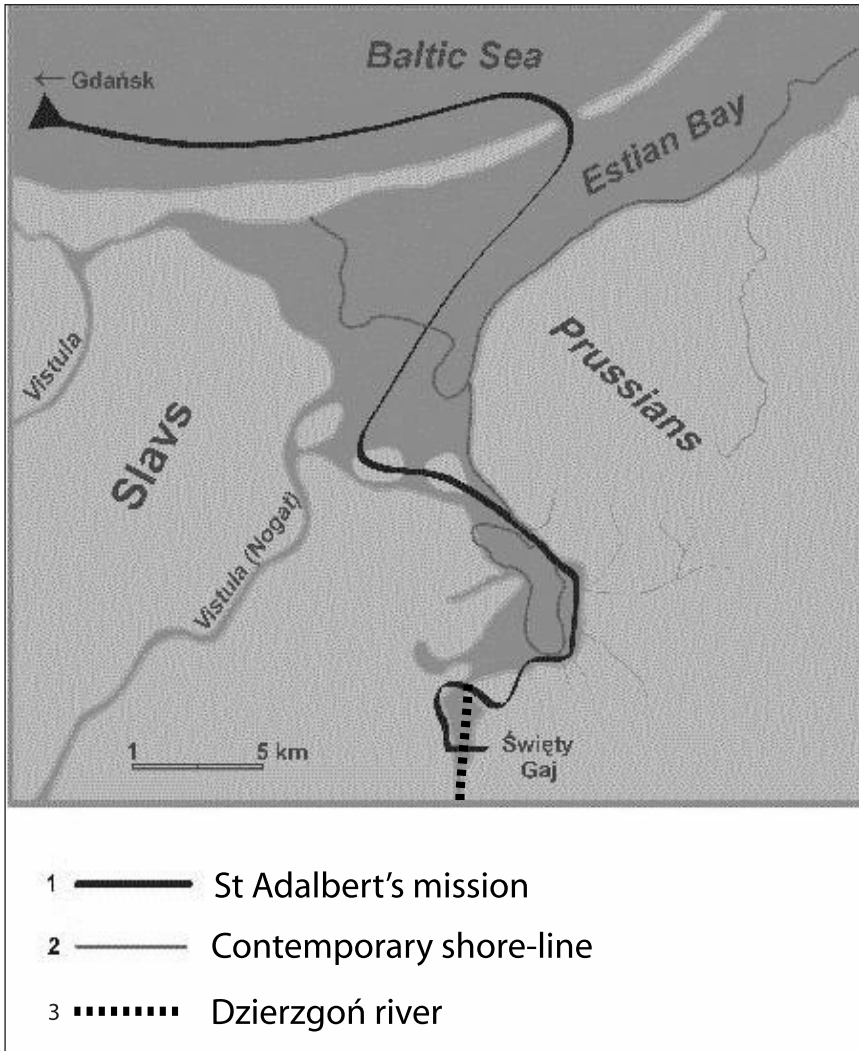


Figure 3.

mission to propagate the Christian faith (see analysis of political circumstances in Urbańczyk 1997). This ill fated action was inspired by the Polish Prince Boleslav the Great who tried to weaken the Prussians by undermining their ideological identity. This day-by-day story describes how missionaries came by boat from Polish Gdańsk and landed on an island close to the Prussian coast. From here, they were brought to a 'town' where the local assembly rejected conversion and expelled three monks back to the Polish coast. After three days of contemplation, the missionaries walked back to the Prussians, where Voitech-Adalbert was killed immediately. Careful studies have allowed delimitation of this precise itinerary in the landscape of the Dzierzgoń River, and confirmed its divisional function (figure 3). It maintained this function during

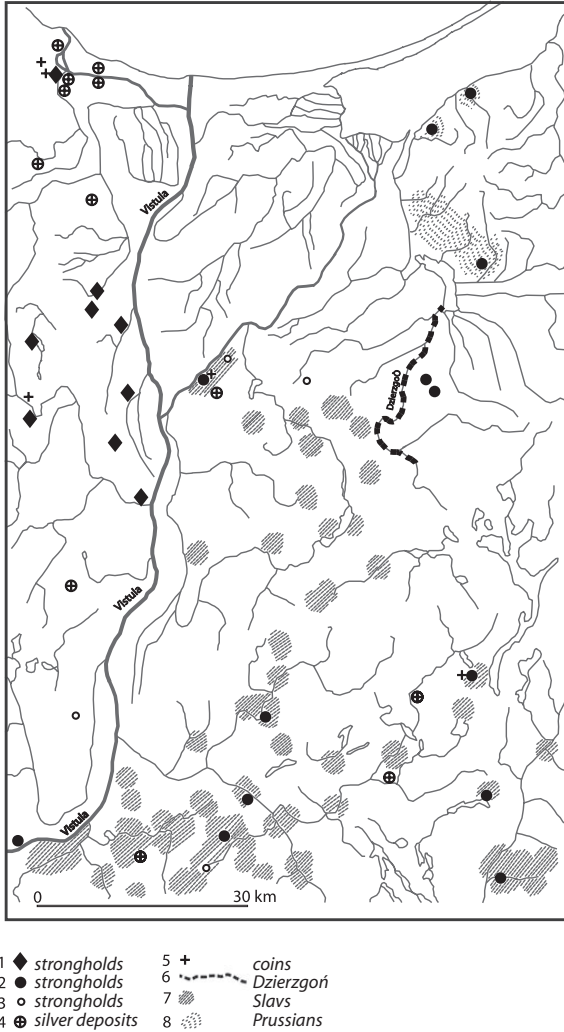


Figure 4. After Chudziak 1999:Fig.2

the next century despite expansion of both Slavs and Prussians who approached the river, but did not cross it (*figure 4*).

Three centuries later, the political and socio-cultural situation was totally different. In 1226, the Masovian Prince Conrad, disillusioned with the long attempts to subordinate his Prussian neighbours, invited the German order of Teutonic Knights to curb the stubborn pagans. After sixty years of bloody wars, the newcomers crushed all resistance and managed to organise a stable state around the lower Vistula. They introduced a modern administrative system with division into hierarchical units. Our Dzierzgoń River received special attention, and served as a borderline between two administrative bodies as early as in the early fifteenth century (*figure 5*).

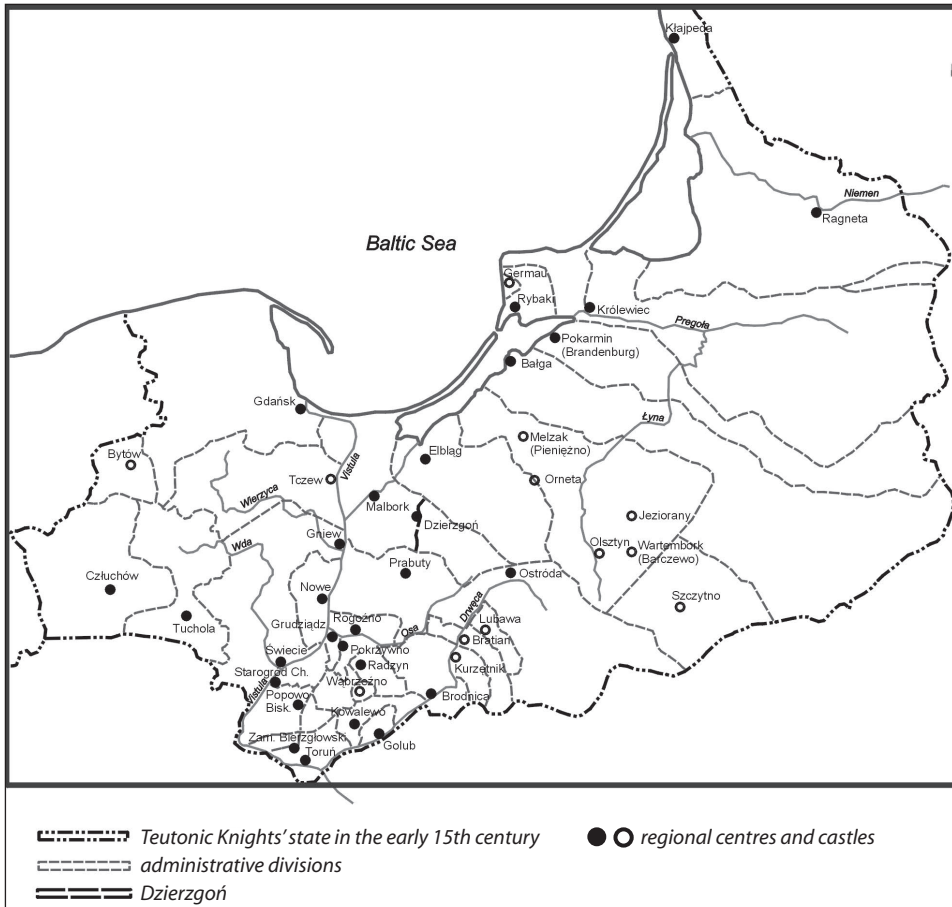


Figure 5. After Biskup 1969:Fig.211

This situation lasted until 1466, when a united Poland and Lithuania crushed the power of Teutonic Knights after the so-called 'thirteen years war'. The peace treaty signed in Toruń divided the state into two parts: the Royal Prussia was incorporated into the Polish kingdom and the Princely Prussia survived as a vassal state.¹ Again, this new national border, designed as a very complicated contour cutting the landscape in a very strange way, used the main part of the Dzierzgoń River as a division line (figure 6).

This border survived until 1772 despite changing geopolitical circumstances that favoured Prussia and weakened Poland. That very year Prussia, Austria and Russia snatched large parts of the Polish-Lithuanian kingdom. In the north, the expanding Prussian kingdom introduced a new administrative system that included the former

¹ It is worth noting that the old ethnic name of the Prussians, who were the westernmost of the Baltic peoples, was used to denominate a state organised by the Germanic order that actually exterminated all original Prussians.

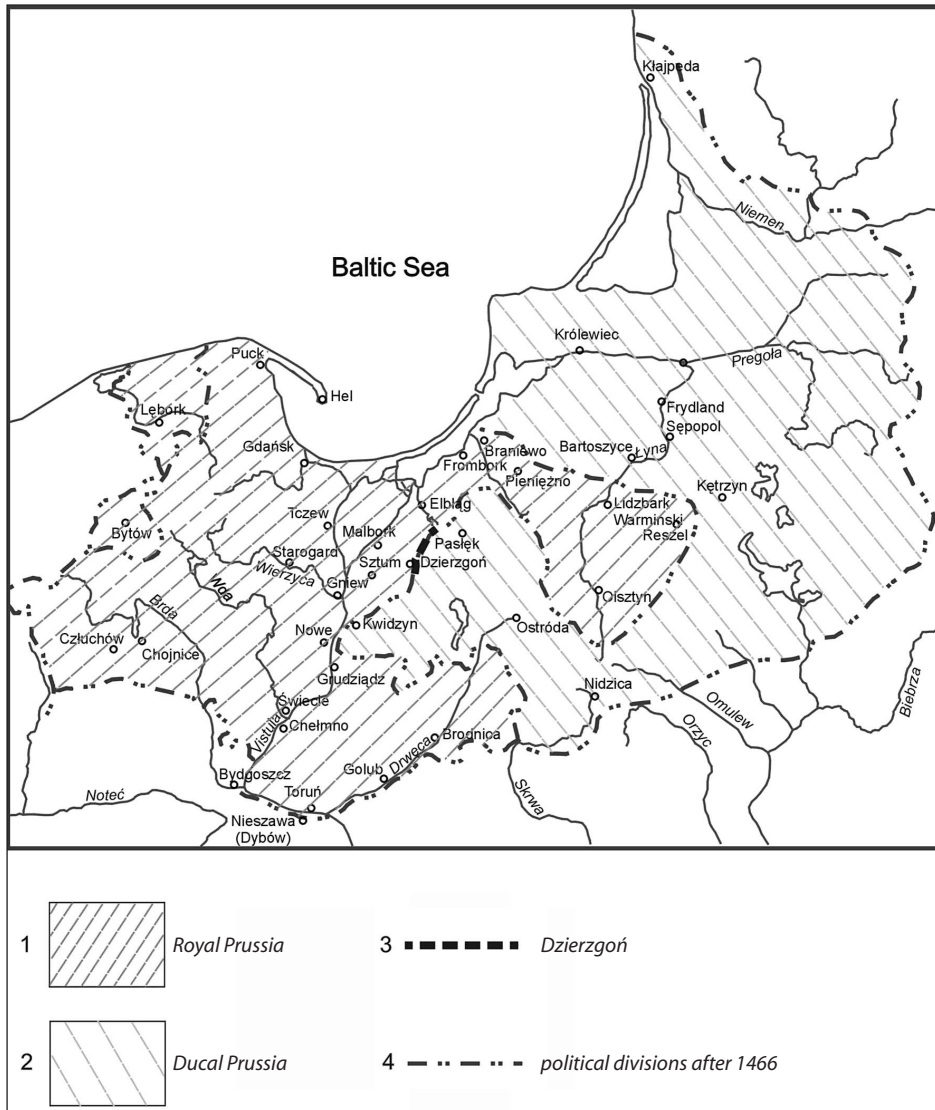


Figure 6. After Biskup 1961

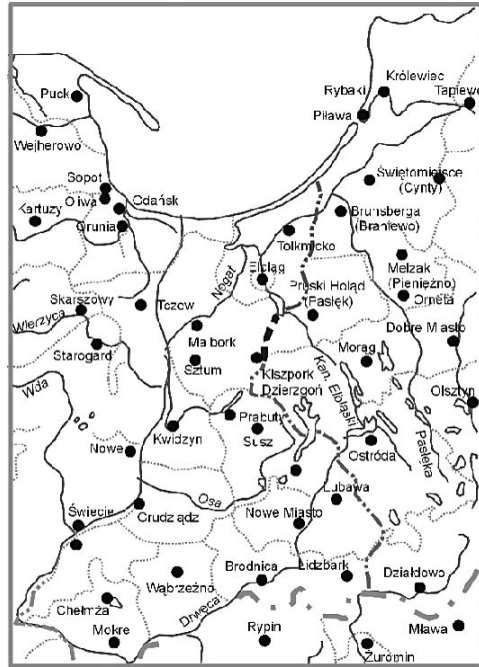
Polish lands. This time the Dzierzgoń River (German name - Sorge) marked the western border of the new province, ruled from Königsberg (today Kaliningrad in Russia). Again, this seemingly unimportant river appeared more important than the large Lake Druzno and the much bigger River Elbing (*figure 7*).

This border was later stabilised with the division of the north-eastern part of the German Empire into the Ostpreussen and the Westpreussen provinces. A division which lasted until the World War I (*figure 8*). The winning allies decided to ask the inhabitants of some of the territories in which state they wanted to be citizens. The



1 ■■■■■ Dzierzgoń

Figure 7. After Kasprzycka 1999:Fig. 51



1 administrative divisions
 2 - - - - - division between Western and Eastern Prussia
 3 ■■■■■ Dzierzgoń
 4 - · - · - Polish-Prussian border

Figure 8. After 'Historia Polski' 1963

limits of the 'plebiscit' area included some of the East-Prussian as well as some of the West-Prussian districts. However, the Dzierzgoń River upheld its dividing function. This time it marked the eastern limit of the area inhabited by Polish speaking people (figure 9).

Included in the new Ostpreussen province, the river divided smaller administrative units until 1945, when this part of Germany was returned to Poland during territorial settlements between the three victorious superpowers. Soon, the Polish government imposed a new administrative system with the 'voivodships' of Gdańsk and Olsztyn that were separated by our River Dzierzgoń. Still, a new division introduced in 1976 left the river as a border of lower units (*gmina*). It regained its long earned importance in 1998, when a reorganisation of the state reinstalled it as a voivodship border.

This is not, however, the end of this very long story of a very small river, which, during more than one millennium, attracted more attention than it really deserved. I could feel this mysterious power of Dzierzgoń River when I excavated in its broad valley in 1994-96. Surveyors hired to put our trenches into the stately co-ordination system discovered that, for some inexplicable reason, this system breaks along our river, which caused much more time expenditure. This experience made me search for an

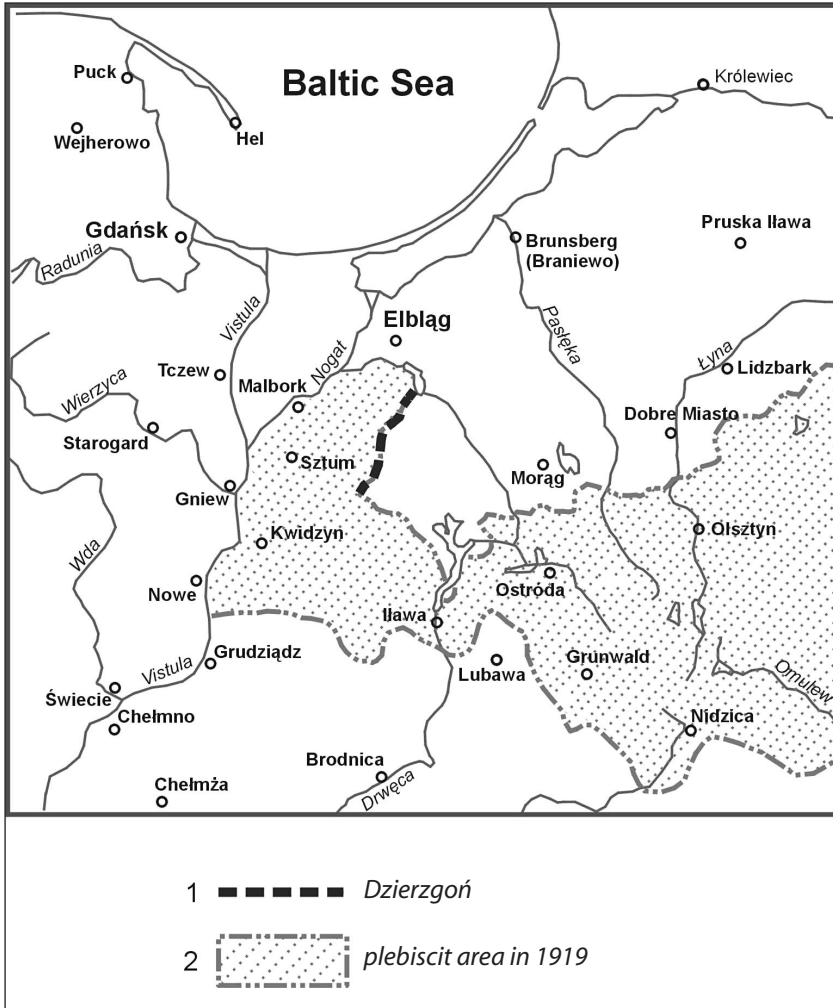


Figure 9. After 'Atlas historyczny Polski 1961

explanation of this phenomenon. The further back I went, the more I wondered why the changing cultural, ethnic, political and administrative situations did not put an end to its dividing function. However, putting together all the above-mentioned facts did not help me to find any rational explanation.

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