

# Gertruda MieszkoŃowna i jej Manuskrypt

## Gertrude, daughter of Mieszko II, and her *Prayer-Book*

### Summary

Gertrude, born in about 1025, the daughter of Mieszko II, king of Poland and the son and successor of Boleslaw the Brave, was given by her mother, the German Princess Richeza, on the occasion of her marriage in 1043 to Izjaslaw, son of Jaroslaw the Wise, the Prince of Kiev, the valuable and richly illuminated *Codex of Egbert* which contained a Psalter and some other scripts. Gertrude, who had been brought up in a nunnery, doubtless for a time prayed from the *Psalter* but at some point began to compose her own prayers, written in the setting of the “liturgy of the hours”. From the pages of her manuscript Gertrude emerges as a deeply religious and at the same time as a strong personality. A thorough theological schooling, a high level of literary ability and even aesthetic sensibility are revealed in the text. Different prayers are indicative of changes in the Princess’s spiritual state and are linked to various phases of her life, a life which was neither easy nor safe.

### **I** Gertrude’s life

Gertrude, as the daughter of Mieszko II and Richeza (the daughter of Henfied Ezzo and Matilda, the sister of Emperor Otto III) was on her father’s side the granddaughter of Boleslaw the Brave and the great granddaughter of Mieszko I, while on her mother’s side her great grandparents (the parents of Matilda) were the Emperor Otto II and the Empress Theophano, a Byzantine princess.

Mieszko and Richeza were married in 1013. It was said of Mieszko that he inherited from his father a proneness to loose living. Be that as it may, as long as Boleslaw the Brave was alive. children were born to the couple: Kazimierz, Gertrude and another daughter. Mieszko II was crowned king of Poland in 1025 – in the same year that his father died. Shortly afterwards his conjugal life with Richeza began to deteriorate. Moreover, Mieszko became involved in dynastic conflicts. The proud Richeza left Poznan, taking with her both princesses; Gertrude could then have been no more than 7 years old. After handing over Polish regalia to the Emperor Conrad, Richeza first settled in her home city of Cologne and then it seems in the nunnery of St. Nicholas in Brauweiler, where she engaged from the start in extensive community work – when she died in

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1063 she was honoured by being buried in a special chapel (now lies in the apse of Cologne cathedral).

In 1043 Gertrude's brother, Casimir the Restorer betrothed her to Izjaslaw Jaroslawowicz, heir to the Kiev throne and the nephew of Dobronega-Maria, the spouse of Kazimierz.. Gertrude's husband was the son of Jaroslaw called the Wise and the grandson of Włodzimierz the Great, who was responsible for the conversion in 988 of Rus to Christianity. Izjaslaw's grandmother was Anna, the daughter of a Byzantine Emperor. It seems likely that Gertrude, who had been brought up in a nunnery, felt at ease in the court of Kiev, where books and art were highly appreciated.

Izjaslaw took over the reins of power in the city of Kiev after the death of Jaroslaw the Wise in 1054. However, he was driven out from Kiev, for the first time, in 1068. The princely pair went to Poland where the ruler at the time was Gertrude's nephew, Boleslaw II the Bold. He helped Izjaslaw and installed him again in Kiev.

The foreign intervention was undoubtedly resented by Izjaslaw's subjects. After less than three years, Izjaslaw was overthrown again in 1073 and forced to flee to his wife's nephew. Izjaslaw was accompanied by Gertrude and their sons Swiatopelk-Michal and Jaropelk-Piotr. However, Boleslaw II considered that he had not received adequate reward for his earlier assistance; he seized the treasures brought from Kiev by the exiles and forced them to leave Poland.

The year 1075 saw the taking up of the most extreme positions in the investiture controversy – for it was then that Gregory VII promulgated, at the Synod in Rome during the Lenten Fast, the Bull *Dictatus papae* which asserted the Papacy's complete independence. After leaving Poland, Izjaslaw went to Germany with his family, where thanks to the intervention of Margrave Dedi he succeeded in getting Henry IV to agree to send, in January 1075, envoys to Kiev. However, the envoys returned empty-handed. Izjaslaw then (or else at the same time that the envoys were despatched to Rus) directed Jaropelk-Piotr to go to Rome, to Gregory VII. The Pope reacted vigorously: in a letter to the princely couple he informed them that Jaropelk-Piotr had put Rus under the protection of St Peter, while in a Bull of 25 April 1075 addressed to Boleslaus II he instructed the king to hand back to Izjaslaw the seized treasures and to provide him with all necessary help. If one takes into account the fact that at that time the whole of Europe was divided into two camps, the Gregorian and the anti-Gregorian, it means that during their stay in the territories of the Empire Izjaslaw and Gertrude must have changed sides from the anti-Gregorian (Imperial) to the Gregorian party. This is evidence of the pragmatism of their politics and of clever diplomacy in adverse circumstances. Professor Teresa Michalowska, the author of the most complete biography of

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Gertrude, is of the view that it was then that the Princess started to compose her prayers, beginning with pleadings to St. Peter the Apostle for intercession on the princely couple's behalf. This was in the context of Jaroslaw-Piotr's "mission to Rome". Below is the second of the prayers in Gertrude's compositions:

Sancte Petre, princeps apostolorum,  
qui tenes claves regni caelorum,  
per illum amorem quo tu Dominum amasti et amas,  
et per suavissimam misericordiam suam  
qua te Deus  
per trinam negationem amare flentem  
misericorditer respexit  
in me, indignam famulam Christi, clementer respice  
cunctorumque scelerum et criminum vincula meorum  
absolve et impetra mihi a pio et benigno Iesu veram humilitatem,  
caritatem Dei et proximi, non fictam benignitatem, mansuetudinem,  
bonos mores et honestos,  
castitatem et animae corporis sanitatem,  
et bonum finem, et gratiam Sancte Trinitatis sine fine. Amen.

On 15 July 1077 Boleslaw II again placed Izjaslaw on the Kiev throne, for an even shorter spell this time. Izjaslaw died in the course of dynastic conflicts after ruling for only a few months.

After his death, Gertrude together with Jaropelk, then the Prince of Wladimir in Volhyn settled in Turow. Several Byzantine miniatures appended to Gertrude's *Codex* are linked to the stay there and it can also be surmised that some of the prayers for her son were composed during that period; he was forced out of the principality in 1084 and had, like his father, to save himself by fleeing to Poland. Jaropelk regained the principality in early 1086 but was murdered soon afterwards, on 22 April of that year. He was buried in Kiev, in the church of St. Peter, which he himself had endowed. He is recalled in chronicles of Rus as a lover of books and learning.

Gertrude then came under the care of her second son, Swiatopelk-Michal who was firstly the ruler of the regional principalities of Novogrod and of Turow but in 1093 became the Prince of Kiev and their overlord. The presence of Gertrude at the court in Kiev helped in maintaining cordial

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relations between the Izjaslaw and Piast dynasties; an outcome of this was the marriage in 1103 of Boleslaw the Wrymouth to Zbyslaw, Swiatopelk's daughter. She was given the *Codex*, together with her prayers, by Gertrude.

Nestor's chronicle under the date of 4 January 1108 records the death of the mother of Prince Swiatopelk. It seems reasonable to suppose that Gertrude played a significant role at the court in Rus for Nestor to make a special mention of her.

## 2) The history of the *Codex of Gertrude*

In 977 Egbert became the Archbishop of Trier. He funded, for the needs of the cathedral choir, the creation of the magnificent *Psalter*, probably commissioning it from the famous school of manuscripts and illuminations in Reichenau. The scribe Rouprecht produced the *Psalter* for the Archbishop. This information is recorded by illustrations in the *Codex* annotated by appropriate inscriptions. The Archbishop died in 993. Fighting over the archbishopric started in the early years of the eleventh century. In the course of the fighting, *Egbert's Psalter* fell into the hands of the Emperor's son-in-law, Henfried Ezzo, the Rhinish Palatine who was married to Matilda, the daughter of the Emperor Otto III and the Empress Theophano. It seems that not long afterwards the valuable book became part of the dowry of the Emperor's granddaughter, Richeza, who was married in 1013 to Mieszko, Boleslaw's son and the heir to the Polish throne. The valuable *Codex* was then probably brought by Richeza to Poland and it is possible that the Cracow calendar was added to it at that time.

Richeza gave the *Codex* to her daughter Gertrude as a wedding present when she married Jaroslaw, the Prince of Kiev in 1043. The Piast princess kept the book with her, throughout the vicissitudes of her life, until 1103 when she gave the book, enlarged by her own inscriptions, to her granddaughter, Zbyslaw Swiatopelk on her marriage to Boleslaus the Wrymouth. Ten years later, after the death of Zbyslaw, Boleslaus married Salomea of Berg, who gave the *Codex* to Gertrude, daughter of this marriage, who was a nun in Zwiefalten. After the death of Gertrude in 1160 the *Codex* passed to Hungary. In 1229 Elizabeth of Hungary presented the *Codex* to the cathedral in Cividale. It has remained there until the present day.

For our purposes the most important part of the *Codex* is Gertrude's manuscript, which comprises, depending on how these are numbered, from over ninety to a hundred prayers, inscribed in the margins and on inserts, specially sown in.

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## 3) Gertrude's *Prayer Book*

In compiling the *Prayer Book* the Princess intentionally set out to create her own *Libellus precum*, with a clear theological, ascetic and to some extent political arrangement. This intention can be plainly discerned from the text and iconography of the middle inserts (II and III) of *folia Gertrudiana*. The first four miniatures appear there, possessing a distinct iconographic “design”, as does also the first set of prayers which is clearly in keeping with this design.

The tempestuous course of the Princess's life and her changing circumstances, with the impact that these must have had on her emotional state, as well as - and this is of significance - the gradual evolution of her spiritual life resulted in modifications of the “design” of the *Prayer-Book*. On appropriate occasions, Gertrude copied into her *Libellum* “learned” texts and prayers, and also perhaps the *Calendar* and *Prognostics*. At the court in Kiev she made her *Prayer-Book* more widely accessible, using it as the basic source for communal prayer. During all that time, as well as for long afterwards, the prayers are inscribed in the same hand. The same person also added the very personal supplications for the beloved son, Jaropelk-Piotr. At times there are changes in the presentation, the size of letters, the colour of the ink and there are variations in the care with which the inscriptions are written (sometimes the text is very well presented, but sometimes the writing does not seem able to keep up with the rush of thoughts and emotions) all of which seems to point very clearly to the Princess being both the author and the scribe of the manuscript. However, that has been questioned, sometimes very strongly, in Polish historical studies.

The prayers are offered by Gertrude in the first person, with her name being specifically mentioned. Given this, it is not necessary to resort to generally accepted methods for the appraisal of historical sources; common sense suffices. For there is no known contemporary evidence which puts in question what the author says. No indications can be traced in the manuscript which might cast doubt on the author's veracity. The few historical references (eg the son's name) in the text point unequivocally to Gertrude as the author of the manuscript.

## 4) The textual content of Gertrude's *Prayer-Book*

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In the context of Gertrude's life, and especially of her spiritual life, the *Prayer-Book* marked a particular period – not the early years, for Gertrude began writing it as a mature woman, in her fifties, with grown up children and probably also some grandchildren. She owned the *Codex of Egbert* for over thirty years. The manuscript took some years to be written (exactly thirteen, if one accepts that the last two prayers were written in 1088). Gertrude did not add to the manuscript in her later years; the Princess lived for twenty years after inscribing the last prayer. She disposed of the *Codex* in 1103, five years before her death, handing it over to her granddaughter, Zbysława Swiatopelk.

It seems reasonable to say, on the basis of the analysis of the spiritual development of the author of the prayers, that Gertrude ceased to feel the need to convey to parchment her dialogue with God when that dialogue became transformed into a higher form, which could dispense with words, of contemplative prayer. If, as is thought, Gertrude at the stage in question, had entered, or merely had lived in the nunnery of St. Nicholas which she had founded in Kiev, this supposition seems very likely to be right, as then the Princess would not have herself needed to arrange *officium divinum* since this was an integral part of cloistered life.

## 1. Compassion as a form of the love of God

Gertrude most frequently addressed God as : “Sanctus Dominus, Pater omnipotens, eternus Deus”<sup>1</sup>, though she often also described God by using the adjective “Fortis”. She also spoke of the Creator as: “Misericordissimus Dominus”, “Rex regum”, “Dominus dominatum”, “refugium meum”, “Liberator”, “Pater et dominator...” qui es super tronos...de sede sancta...tollis peccata mundi misere nobis (XXIX).

Thus it would seem that in the *Prayer-Book* God is comprehended in two ways: [simply as Himself (*quo ad se*), and also when Gertrude said that He was holy and omnipotent, everlasting and mighty Lord, and King and Ruler. The latter vision of God was expressed by the author through descriptions of Him and through regarding Him in the way He regarded mankind (*quo ad nos*). So from the second perspective, Gertrude felt free to call God the Shepherd of all orphans, the refuge of sinners, the saviour full of the sweetest grace. It is worth adding that Gertrude was at ease in comprehending God in either way and avoided any awkwardnesses on that account. Professor the

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<sup>1</sup> There are two editions of the text of the Prayer-Book: Manuscriptum Gertrudae filiae Mesconis II, Regis Poloniae, cura V. Meysztowicz editum, “Antemurale” 2 (1955), and Liber precum Gertrudae ducissae e Psalterio Egberti cum Calendario, edit. M.H.Malewicz et B.Kurbis, Commentavit B. Kurbis, in: Monumenta Sacra Polonorum, vol. II, Academia Scientiarum et Litterarum Polona, Cracoviae 2002, p.201. Gertrude's prayers have been numbered in several ways; I have used my own, set out in this study.

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Reverend Boguslaw Nadolski who has studied in depth the theology of Gertrude's *Prayer-Book* has termed this as the immanent and transcendental vision of God.

In commenting on the way that God is understood in Gertrude's *Prayer-Book* it is above all necessary to note that, for Gertrude, God's love took the form of compassion. Gertrude experienced that compassion and begged for the blessing of such compassion for herself, for those dear to her and for the whole Church. Her attitude to God derived directly from the Holy Writ. This is evidenced by the Biblical examples of God's compassion, for instance for the crucified thief, for St. Peter, for St. Mary Magdalene, for the woman of Canaan or for the tax collector. That aspect was not manifested in the then prevalent ascetic theology. Gertrude did not fear hell but regarded it as a place in which God's glory was not celebrated; it was for that reason that she did not want to go to hell.

## 4.2. Trust and longing as the expression of the love of mankind for God

Gertrude, having experienced God's constant compassion towards herself, took account of that compassion in her prayers to God; that can appropriately be called trust. Such trust in God underlay the nature of Gertrude's love for her Creator and Saviour. However, the desire to be in His presence was the prerequisite for coming closer to God. That desire took the form in Gertrude's *Prayer-Book* of sometimes overwhelming longing.

Gertrude's relationship with God was built on God's grace. Gertrude did not have the slightest doubt that mankind was incapable on its own of even so much as addressing a sigh to its Creator and Saviour. Hence she begged God for everything and seemed to be aware that she was the recipient of the favours for which she had asked. Her dialogue with God evidenced a close friendship with God, almost to the point of being with Him. This explains Gertrude's exceptional directness, sometimes importunity, which gives the impression that she occasionally wanted to force her will on God.

The dogma about the presence of the saints particularly appealed to Gertrude. This is confirmed by the prayers for the dead. The Princess regarded the Mother of God, the angels and the saints as persons very close to her, on whom it was possible to rely completely in confiding worries and problems. Her belief in the goodwill of the saints towards us, even when we are burdened by the most loathsome sins, was so steadfast that it is possible to describe it as friendship in a truly classical mould.

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It is worth stressing that, while Gertrude was emotionally impetuous and sometimes impatient, she was characterised by wise moderation and even restraint in her beliefs. The dissertation has sought to show that the first text written by a Pole does not just take the form of a prayer-book but that its content consists of genuine and serious prayers, in which the presence of Christ<sup>2</sup> constitutes a real problem. Apart from the Trinitarian and Christological aspects of the prayers, there are many Biblical elements in them, for example the emphasis on God's compassion. The theological approach in the texts written by Gertrude indicates that in the theology of the eleventh century, in which the prayer-book undoubtedly stands as a "landmark", there existed, despite what one might expect from a study of the history of theology, a deeper and richer vein of theological thought than just Augustinism.

## 5. The historical significance of Gertrude's *Prayer-Book*

### 5.1 A landmark in the "Ottonian renaissance"

The tenth century is generally though mistakenly considered as a "Dark Age". The reason for this stems from the assessment of European history and culture made solely from the viewpoint of Rome or Paris. From that perspective, the tenth century does indeed mark the final end of the Carolingian renaissance and of Roman universalism. Yet it was in that century that Christianity significantly extended its borders, resulting in the inclusion in the European family of the nations of Denmark (948), Poland (966), Hungary (974), Rus (988) and Iceland (996). This points to the existence of religious, cultural and organisational vitality. One of the channels transmitting that vitality was to be found in the Empire, by then firmly bound with the Germanic peoples.

Following the Treaty of Verdun, Louis the German took no interest in learning and culture to the east of the Rhine, while the death of Louis II (875), who left no heir, started long lasting contests for the Imperial throne, which only ended in 918 on the accession of Henry I to the throne. At first nothing indicated that this was the beginning of a period which, perhaps with a little exaggeration, is called the "Ottonian renaissance". However, the term can reasonably stand, bearing in mind how far the achievements of the "Teacher of Germany", Rabanus Maurus, had been dissipated and also in view of the fact that this renaissance involved the Carolingian far more than the classical cultural inheritance. The renaissance lasted throughout the whole of the reigns of Otto I

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<sup>2</sup> Gertrude used simply the form "Christi presentiam" in prayer CV10.



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(936-973), Otto II (973-983) and Otto III (983-1002). Women played an unusually prominent role in this process through Adelaide (+999) a Frenchwoman and the wife of Otto I, and her daughter-in-law, the Byzantine princess Theophano (+991), the wife of Otto II and the mother of Otto III. Married to illiterate Emperors, both acted as the true architects of the educational policies of their husbands. The Empress Theophano moreover exercised influence through her son, Otto III. It seems likely that the Empress passed down the traits - strength and imperiousness - which characterised the women in the family, to her daughter Richeza and to her granddaughter Gertrude. Thietmar wrote about Theophano: “She took care of her son’s domains almost like a man, giving full support to the just while breaking and frightening those who raised their heads.” Similar features of character frequently emerge from the pages of the Prayer-Book of the granddaughter of the Empress Theophano.

## 5.2 A landmark in Polish culture

One might reasonably ask whether the document under consideration here relates in any degree to Polish culture: it was created in the Rhineland, was significantly enriched in Kiev Rus and is now in northern Italy. The basis for a positive answer is provided by Gertrude herself, for she was the link between Poland, the country with which she identified, the Rhineland, where she spent her youth and gained her education, and Kiev Rus with which she was associated throughout the mature years of her long life. One might be surprised that Gertrude, who had spent at the most the first seven years of her life in Poland and who together with her mother had left that country as a refugee, nevertheless had considered herself to be Polish. However, the *Patetyk kijowsko-pieczerski* leaves no room for doubt for it recounts that: “when our holy father Anthony was exiled by Prince Izjaslaw, the Princess his wife, who was Polish, protested saying: *Do not think of doing such a thing and do not do it. For it happened in our country some time ago that monks were banished from our country for a particular reason, and that led to great ill fortune for Poland.*” In the text cited, in which Gertrude warned her husband in about 1060 against a conflict with Monaster of Pieczersk, the author first describes Gertrude as Polish and then records that she twice spoke of Poland as “our country”.

Thus Gertrude had a clear awareness of both her national and religious affiliations: much has been written already about her Catholic orthodoxy. One might even risk asserting that while considering herself to be Polish she was at the same time a member of the whole European

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*Christianitas*, managing effectively her affairs in Rome, Cracow and Kiev. She succeeded in finding shelter in Poland, Saxony and the Rhineland. It is also worth noting that she remained in Kiev Rus until her death, even though she had the opportunity to leave, first after her husband's death and then after her son died (as her daughter-in-law, Kunegunda-Irena, did when she was widowed, even at the cost of leaving her small children behind in Rus). It is surmised that Gertrude's presence at the court in Kiev helped in the maintenance of good relations between the Izjaslaw and Piast families, exemplified by the so-called Brest negotiations in 1099 between Swiatopelk and Wladyslaw Herman and also by the marriage of Boleslaw the Wrymouth to Swiatopelk's daughter, Zbyslawka, in 1103.

Thus it is clearly right to consider Gertrude's *Prayer-book* to be the oldest Polish text and also that it provides important evidence of cultural contacts with the West as well as the East. It is also appropriate to highlight that Gertrude, while feeling herself to be Polish and while being attached to Roman Catholic orthodoxy, was at the same time receptive to the Byzantine culture of Rus and to the Greek liturgy of the Rus church. Thus she instructed that the prayer-book should be adorned with illuminations in the Rus style; it is not difficult to surmise, on perusing the *Codex of Egbert*, why that decision should have been made – the artistic standard of the “latin” miniatures in it falls way below that of the comparable Rus illuminations. The prayers contain many instances of the use of the Greek “supplication” and “akatyst” alongside the *Credo* of Nicea-Constantinople with *Filioque*.

## 5.3 A landmark in religious culture

It needs to be emphasised above all that Gertrude was well versed in the theology of her time. She understood the theology of the Holy Trinity and also Christology, developed in the fourth and fifth centuries. She was acquainted with the writings of St. Augustine dating from the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries and with the work “Celestial Hierarchy” of Dionysius, the Pseudo-Areopagite from the sixth century. She also understood well the theological debates which had taken place at the court of Charlemagne (*Filioque*) and the subjects of the controversies of the ninth century (*futurabilia*). As regards the last, it is interesting to note that Gertrude's wording of the problem recalls both the ninth century solutions to the disputes about predestination and also the fifteenth century debates on the question of God's foreknowledge (*praestientia Dei*). It is astonishing that there are to be found in the *Prayer-book* many elements which surface much later

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in European religious culture. Thus the problems of “creation” and of “renewal” appear there (in prayer LXV), while these were not to be enquired into until the twelfth century, by the learned monks of the monastery of St. Victor. The cult of Jesus, in which His humanity was emphasised, and the stress laid on humility and gentleness are associated with St. Bernard of Clairvaux, also in the twelfth century. The cult of St. Mary Magdalene, exemplified in prayer CV, did not appear until the thirteenth century, and that of the Passion of Christ, which is met with frequently in the *Prayer-Book*, owes its place in European religious culture to the Franciscans who popularised it in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; they also promoted the cult of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Gertrude’s especial worship of the Body of Christ – martyred on the Cross and accessible through the Eucharist – echoes the disputes of the ninth century about the Eucharist and at the same time anticipates the cult of Corpus Christi which is linked to St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century.

It can also be said that Gertrude’s texts are prayers *par excellence*, for they are conversations with God, something that Gertrude regarded as natural, confiding to Him the most important matters in her life. After studying Gertrude’s prayers, Professor Mieczyslaw Gogacz said that: “God constitutes an absolute reality for her. Gertrude is immersed in it and seeks help from it. For Gertrude, Christianity is not just a scheme of beliefs, but is an inherent part of man’s nature, whose difficulties are caused by the enemies of God.”

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It is high time that an important change to accepted history should become generally known. The first Polish text is not, as has been believed up to now, the *Chronicle of Poland* of Wincenty Kadlubek, Bishop of Cracow, but the *Prayer-Book* of Gertrude, daughter of Mieszko II, composed nearly two centuries earlier. This correction is all the more significant because the *Prayer-Book* is not a collection of illegible inscriptions or of naively embarrassing legends but because it consists of texts which turn to God seriously, have sound theological grounding and are written in enchanting psalmodic poetry. One can readily share in the very human emotions pervading them: loneliness and abandonment, concern about a son, sincere respect for the live and the dead. Gertrude speaks to us as someone very close, standing nearby, whose breathing we seem to feel besides us. The 1000 years that have passed teach us that systems and rulers pass away and that nations fall and rise again but that human love and longings remain the same.

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Translated by Mieczysław Wasilewski