

BAPTISM OF FIRE™

Tabletop role-playing game

Core rules book for adventuring in 11th Century Piast Poland

by *RPGPundit*

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Baptism of Fire is an OSR RPG set in the dawn of the Polish monarchy in the early medieval period. It is a complete rulebook and setting. As a setting, it is “medieval authentic”, meaning that it is set in our own historical Earth rather than a fantasy world; but this is the world as the people living in the setting imagined and envisioned it. That is to say, religion, magic and monsters all exist and function as the paradigm of the early medieval world imagined it.

The default setting of Baptism of Fire is a society that is transforming from a Dark Age culture to an early Medieval culture. Poland in the early 10th Century was moving from a sedentary tribal system of “barbarians”, to the beginnings of a feudal society, united under a monarchy. As part of the process of successfully making this shift, the Piast rulers had introduced the unifying force of Christianity to the land.

The process of unifying disparate people into a single nation was predictably met with resistance. But the Piast dukes were clever enough to make good alliances, including with the more powerful Christian kingdoms that had risen up from the ruins of the Roman Empire. Christianity would help cement a common culture for many local tribes, smoothing over countless ancient divisions and rivalries, and legitimizing the crown. But while Christianity had many progressive ideas that appealed to many people, there would nevertheless be a great many who would refuse to give up their age-old gods and heathen traditions without a fight.

All of this was taking place in a setting that was wild and magical. After the fall of Rome, the population of Europe had declined dramatically and failed to grow for five centuries. Monsters, fairies, demons and dark magic ran wild outside of the safety of human cities. The Christianization of Poland was also the taming of that land, purifying it of the dangers of the dark wild and bringing the light of civilization and its accompanying stability and prosperity. In the standard Baptism of Fire campaign, the player characters are agents of that civilizing force.



BAPTISM OF FIRE™

A Core rules book for adventuring in 11th Century Piast Poland



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INTRODUCTION

Baptism of Fire is an OSR RPG set in the dawn of the Polish monarchy in the early medieval period. It is a complete rulebook and setting. As a setting, it is “medieval authentic,” meaning it is set in our own historical Earth rather than a fantasy world. However, this is the world as the people living in the setting envisioned it.

That is to say, religion, magic, and monsters all exist and function as the paradigm of the early medieval world imagined. The setting is dedicated to presenting the “Piast” Polish world, culture, and events as they historically occurred, but the focus is on playability as a focus of RPG adventuring.

As a system, those who have purchased the Lion & Dragon RPG will recognize the rule set. However, Baptism of Fire has a few modifications and expansions from the L&D setting. Lion & Dragon is set in the late medieval period, whereas Baptism of Fire is set in the early medieval period, meaning there will be important differences in culture and equipment. Additionally, the character classes are different from those of Lion & Dragon, partly because of setting and game choices.

Most notably, the “Cleric” class, which was more of a traditional OSR class and was somewhat anachronistic to medieval authenticity, has been replaced by two separate classes: the Holy Man and the Holy Warrior. At the same time, the Early Medieval nature of the setting means that the Magister is not included as a class, but the Witch Hunter class has been added as a replacement.

Several sections have had slight revisions, and sections like the backgrounds, critical hit tables, and magic items (among others) have been expanded. The magic selection

differs from Lion & Dragon, but techniques from either book can be used interchangeably. Overall, it is a more complete edition, but the fundamental system has been expanded rather than mechanically altered.

Poland in the 11th century

The default setting of Baptism of Fire is in a society that is transforming from a Dark Age culture to an early Medieval culture. Poland in the early 11th century was moving from a sedentary tribal system (what until recently might even have been called “barbarians”) to the beginnings of a feudal society, united under a monarchy (the Piast kings, who were the first to unite disparate tribes into a single people, the Polish). As part of the process of successfully making this shift, the Piast rulers introduced the unifying force of Christianity to the land.

The process of unifying disparate people (albeit of a common general ancestry) into a single nation was predictably met with resistance. There were several possible candidates for potential kingdoms, and the Piasts’ Greater Poland was neither the wealthiest, the most populous, nor the most militaristic of territories.

But the Piast dukes were clever enough to make good alliances, including with the more powerful Christian kingdoms that had risen up from the ruins of the previous borders of the Roman Empire. Duke Mieszko I realized that Christianity could help cement a common culture for all the local tribes that descended from Lech, smoothing over countless ancient divisions and rivalries and legitimizing the Crown. But while Christianity had many progressive ideas that appealed to many people, there would



nevertheless be a great many who would refuse to give up their age-old gods and heathen traditions without a fight.

All of this was taking place in a setting that was wild and magical. After the fall of Rome and the barbarian invasions that contributed to that apocalypse, the population of Europe declined dramatically and failed to grow for five centuries (it would only begin to recover significantly in this century).

The population density of Poland in this century was only 7 per square kilometer. Population centers (the largest of which had only a few thousand inhabitants) were tiny islands of stability surrounded by huge tracts of untamed wilderlands. Monsters, fairies, demons, and dark magic ran wild in these places outside the safety of human order.

The Christianization of Poland was also the taming of that land, purifying it of the dangers of the dark wild and bringing the

light of civilization and its accompanying stability and prosperity. In the standard Baptism of Fire campaign, the player characters are agents of that civilizing force.

Default Setting Assumptions

Baptism of Fire is designed to be used in the setting of early Piast Poland. Still, it can be used in any setting that emphasizes fundamental “medieval authentic” assumptions. Here is a list in brief of some of the most important assumptions that differ from a typical OSR setting:

1. Social Status is Extremely Important

In most OSR games, peasants and princes are treated generally as equals and would interact as equals in a party (at least, in the same sense that in the modern era, it is presumed that the upper classes might have more money and power but



are not inherently superior to the working classes). Knights might get bossed around by a commoner, and smart-mouthed peasants might act less than reverently toward a Bishop.

But in a Medieval-Authentic game, social status may be the most important character detail! It determines the character's place in the world. The nobility had rights forbidden to commoners like being allowed to bear arms in court and having preferential status in social situations.

In a PC party, characters who have higher social status should expect that characters of lower status would, within reason, be deferential to them; of course, some characters of higher status might be smart enough to recognize knowledge and experience from lower-status characters and respect their judgment on those issues.

Also, contrary to many assumptions in modern literature and media, while there were certainly some lords who were stupid or cruel, the majority of the aristocracy have a strong vested interest in caring for their vassals and subjects. Their wealth and prosperity depend on the well-being and loyalty of their subjects, after all, and they believe they were born into their status as part of a divine responsibility to govern over the lower classes wisely.

2. Religion

In the Baptism of Fire setting, religion is a vital aspect of every character's life. When Duke Mieszko I accepted Christianity in the event known as the "Baptism of Poland" in 966AD, it marked a turning point in history and was, in many ways, the birth of Poland as a nation. As the timeline of the setting reveals, the Christianization process was not smooth or easy. Christianity had

many appealing features: to the ruling class, it provided a social unity missing from the disparate pagan practices of individual tribes or clans, and it brought the state into a social contract with the broader Christian European world that increased stability and promoted commerce. It also had widespread appeal to the lower social classes. In the modern era, there's a temptation to think of Christianity as a traditionalist force, sometimes at odds with progressive ideas.

Still, in the 10th and 11th Centuries, Christianity (in comparison to Paganism) introduced radical social values that greatly benefited the common man. European Paganism tended to be more transactional and hierarchical than Christianity in that heroes and Kings were favored by the gods. At the same time, the most a common man could hope for was that by performing rites and sacrifices, the gods might give them a good harvest or stave off illness.

On the other hand, Christianity promoted a radical form of equality. In the mortal world, there were divisions of class and wealth; however, it was the promise of God that anyone who was faithful would obtain the promise of the same paradise. The Christian faith did not require that you win great battles or do great

