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THE ORIGIN OF POLAND, OR IMAGES
OF OUR OWN BEGINNINGS¹

The intention of the presented remarks was not an attempted suggestion of a new hypothesis, derived from research on the origin of the Polish State, performed by archaeologists and linguists. On the contrary, the ascertainments presented below do not have any closer links with the state of knowledge about Polish lands in the tenth century, as proposed in assorted outlines, detailed dissertations, or academic textbooks based on studies which are the outcome of the contemporary research workshop of historians². Presumably, the situation was similar also at the very beginnings of our historiography. Masters of the past created general, innerly logical interpretations of the history of Poland in accordance with knowledge about world history and, to a certain degree, corresponding to social commissions. They did so upon the basis of the state of knowledge prevalent at the time, images of the past, occasionally moulded by political requirements (as is, at times, the case today) and accepted ideology, as well as fragments of human memory, filtered by the present. True, such social commissions were made by extremely scarce groups, but the latter constituted the Polish elites, who considered the commissioned themes to be the most vital.

Obviously, historical consciousness shapes the attitudes of various communities³. In the history of the Poles, for a long time deprived of their own state, the awareness of a temporal com-

¹This is the version of a text expanded and published, without the footnotes, in the book: *O historii prawdziwej (On True History)*, Gdańsk 1997.

²H. Łowmiański, *Początki Polski (The Beginnings of Poland)*, vol. IV, Warszawa 1970, p. 445 ff., vol. V, Warszawa 1973, p. 505; G. Labuda, *Studia nad początkami Państwa Polskiego (Studies into the Beginnings of the Polish State)*, 2nd ed., vol. 1–2, Poznań 1988; recently: *Polska na przestrzeni wieków (Poland across the Ages)*, ed. J. Tazbir, Warszawa 1995, p. 11 ff.

³K. Pomian, *Przeszłość jako przedmiot wiary (Past as the Object of Faith)*, Warszawa 1968, p. 11; M. Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, New York 1961, *passim*.

munity, which referred to experiences of the ancestors, was, and remains exceptionally strong. A component of this awareness of joint history are universally accepted views bearing all the symptoms of a myth. It seems worth seeing how those beliefs, associated with the beginnings of our state and nation, functioned.

Within a limited range, the views in question are alive up to this very day, and every Polish child is more or less familiar with them. More important, there exists a copious scientific literature on their subject. Aleksander Gieysztor, Gerard Labuda, Henryk Łowmiański, Kazimierz Ślaski, Karol Buczek, Jacek Hertel, Julian Maślanka, Jacek Banaszkiewicz, and Czesław Deptuła are only some of the scholars who expanded considerably our knowledge about Popiel, Piast and Krak, in comparison with the classical older studies by Tadeusz Wojciechowski, Aleksander Brückner, Karol Potkański and others. Generally speaking, we should share the view expressed by J. Banaszkiewicz⁴ that "the distinct border delineated by historians between the real (i.e. truly existing) and the fictional (i.e. invented) can no longer be maintained". Let us add that just as real was the creation of the figure of Piast, a feat accomplished by someone in the past; the same holds true for the introduction of this fact into universal collective consciousness, a process which researchers should take into consideration to an even greater degree. In other words, the historian should be interested not only in a verification of the content provided by a myth or a legend, but also in the causes, circumstances and outcome of its emergence and its longer or shorter existence.

Janusz Tazbir perceives three realities transmitted by legends⁵: "the actual one, the one which stems from legends, and the one which the masses believe". Let us add that in the course of history the latter reality succumbed to assorted deformations. This process took place especially whenever there came into being a written text, which facilitated access to information for increasingly wider social strata, and which created, in consecutive stages, universally recognised ascertainments. "Wanda who refused the German" was introduced onto the pages of history by

⁴J. Banaszkiewicz, *Podanie o Płaście i Popielu (The Legend about Piast and Popiel)*, Warszawa 1986, p. 11.

⁵J. Tazbir, *Od Antemurale do przedmurza: dzieje terminu (From Antemurale to the Bulwark: the History of a Term)*, "Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce", vol. 39, 1984, p. 167.

Master Wincenty. Naturally, it was not the works by Wincenty which were read by mothers to their children; the motif of the Polish princess was developed and modernised by Jan Długosz, from whom it was borrowed by successive chroniclers, men of letters and teachers.

As late as 1825, in other words, during the period of the activity of Joachim Lelewel, the father of modern Polish historiography, there appeared *Kronika Polska przez Prokosza w wieku X napisana* (*The Chronicle of Poland Written in the Tenth Century by Prokosz*), published by N. Glücksberg, bookseller to the Royal University and Lycée of Volhynia. Supposedly discovered by General Franciszek Morawski “in a Jewish stall in Lublin”, where it was used for “wrapping small articles for sale”, the chronicle was presented to the Library of the Warsaw Society of Friends of the Sciences⁶. The manuscript contained commentaries by “two learned men”, written, in the opinion of the publisher, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Their erudite arguments not only led to the establishment of a precise chronology of the reign of the Lech and Krak rulers, but also to solving the puzzle of the authorship of the chronicle. Prokosz was identified as Prokop — the mysterious bishop mentioned in a catalogue of the bishops of Cracow, a “brilliant historian” who died in 986. The chronicle itself offers an inquisitive reader with the precise information that “Wenda” (whose reign is discussed on five pages) “was crowned in 735 and drowned herself in 740”.

Even the more serious textbooks recorded the legend of Wanda. It is not surprising, therefore, that it continued being mentioned up to our times by scholars of utmost rank, such as Henryk Łowmiański, important popularisers of history, such as Władysław Anczyc, and authors of children’s books, to mention only Kornel Makuszyński. Without delving into detailed reflections on the contents, we can say that Master Wincenty, the creator of Wanda, needed the legend for the purposes of explaining the origin of the names *Wisła* and *Wiślane* (in accordance with the view that a word comprises a key to an object), and probably for demonstrating such values as sacrifice,

⁶*Kronika Polska przez Prokosza w wiekach średnich napisana. Z dodatkami z kroniki Kagnimira pisana wieku XI i z przypisami krytycznymi komentatora wieku XVIII* (*Chronicle of Poland Written in the Middle Ages by Prokosz. With Addenda from the Chronicle of Kagnimir and Critical Notations by an Eighteenth-century Commentator*), Warszawa 1825.

love of Homeland, and virtue. Długosz referred to Wincenty and accentuated magnificent pages from the history of “the Polish Kingdom”. Consecutive writers required Wanda as a universally known historical motif, whose omission could only prove their ignorance. In addition, as in the case of Lech, the worse the political condition of the state, the more necessary did it become to stir the hearts of the readers by recalling a worthy past and memorable accomplishments.

This was also the target of the nineteenth-century popularisers of Polish history, well aware of the fairy-tale coating of the stories. In the highly popular *Wieczory pod lipą* (*Evenings under the Linden Tree*)⁷ the wise grandfather recalls a glorious past in which his grandchildren can take pride. During a period marked by the loss of state existence, “Wanda” became a purely fairy-tale slogan, but one which played a part analogous to that of actual persons and places: Boleslaus the Brave, Boleslaus the Wry-mouth, Jagiello, the battle of Grunwald or Wawel Castle. Undoubtedly, the above mentioned children’s book by Kornel Makuszyński did not harbour such ambitions but, in accordance with the eternal historiographic principle, a presentation of history, also one addressed to the youngest readers, should begin with fairy-tale times. *Nowe bajki tego roku, pierwsza o wawelskim smoku* (*This Year’s New Tales, the First about the Wawel Dragon*) was, however, an interesting or even pioneering example. The great popularity of historical comics began after the second world war: stories about the knights of King Arthur, the adventures of Asterix, the valiant Gall, not to mention series concerning modern wartime adventures, probably announced the approach of new global culture: the return to visual transmission (the books by Makuszyński were actually a series illustrated by Marian Walentynowicz) and a television-era departure from the primacy of the written word.

By basing ourselves on assorted detailed studies, we can accept that the “myth of the beginnings” of Poland was created or construed by mediaeval historians. One has to agree with Czesław Deptuła⁸ that Gallus Anonymus conceived the beginnings of Poland as an image of “the second Beginning” —

⁷L. Stępieński, *Wieczory pod lipą* (*Evenings under the Linden Tree*), Kraków 1864.

⁸C. Deptuła, *Galla Anonima mit genezy Polski* (*The Myth of the Origin of Poland according to Gallus Anonymus*), Lublin 1990, p. 66, 338.

connected with the acceptance of baptism. Without rejecting the impact of older conceptions concerning the arrangement of the world, Jacek Banaszkiewicz⁹ shows the ideological programme expressed in the myths, which aimed at presenting the ruling dynasty as “a royal house capable of guaranteeing the subjects and country all possible prosperity”. It is worth supplementing both those views, which are not so much contrary as complimentary, by taking a closer look at the origin of the Poles in the more expanded contents of the chronicle by Master Wincenty. This scholar was familiar with Gallus, whose work he utilised; what did he alter? Wincenty added assorted events, inserting them into a background of knowledge about world history. He has the Poles conquering the Danes and their King Canute the Great (a passage testifying to the permanence of knowledge about this eleventh-century creator of an empire encompassing Denmark, Norway and part of England), the Greeks, led by Alexander the Great, and the Romans under Julius Caesar. Already those fragments of the chronicle led to the condemnation of Wincenty by nineteenth—and twentieth-century scientists. Naturally, no one doubts that the Poles did not vanquish the Macedonians in fourth century B. C. Nonetheless, even this totally untrue information contains certain positive contents. Let us imagine the reasoning of an educated erudite: it was known that Alexander conquered half of the world, and did not seize Polish lands. If this was the case, then he could have been defeated. This feat could not have been accomplished by force, since Alexander was the commander of the most powerful army; therefore, he could have been defeated by means of a *stratagem* and deceit. The historical ruler Mieszko I and the legendary Leszek were celebrated for various battlefield *stratagems*. The invention of the chronicler proved insufficient for describing the guile which proved capable of tackling Alexander. We may conclude, however, that even this passage constitutes an interesting source about the knowledge of university graduates in the second half of the twelfth century, and even the manner of their reasoning.

Much more intriguing and significant appear to be the other differences between Gallus and Wincenty. The former placed the beginning of his narrative in an undefined era, a feature which

⁹J. Banaszkiewicz, *Podanie, op. cit.*, p. 194.

Wincenty did not change, despite the fact that the twelfth century already witnessed the application of a linear conception of historical time. In the distant past, the chronicler wrote, numerous Poles, (Slavs) captured half of Europe. Is this a recollection of the Slav migrations which took place from the fifth to the seventh century, and reached Crete in the south, the Vézère in the west, and lakes Ladoga and Onega in the east? It would be pleasant to ascribe such knowledge about the past to Master Wincenty, but another solution appears to be much more probable: the chronicler tried to unravel the range of a familiar and understandable language: the word and tongue defined human communities. As late as the twelfth century, people who used comprehensible speech, i.e. the Slavs, in contrast to the babbling, mute (Polish: *niemy*) Germans (Polish: *Niemcy*), were capable of being understood in half of Europe. This fragment of the chronicle by Wincenty is, therefore, evidence rather of familiarity with contemporary reality than of acquaintanceship with the history of events six or seven hundred years old.

Much more remarkable is the placing of the ancient homeland of the Poles in Carinthia. Some of the possible explanations come down to the statement: pure chance. The thesis expanded most widely by Henryk Łowmiański explains this fragment of the chronicle by referring to the emergence of the oldest supra-tribal organisations among the Slavs in Carinthia¹⁰. We know that Slav lords (dukes?) came to Italy already in the sixth century; their names are recorded in the famous so-called *Evangelium from Cividale*. Quite possibly, it was precisely here that they encountered forms of the state organisation of the Roman Empire, the best developed in Europe at the time (Italy, or at least its considerable terrains, was still ruled by Byzantium). A successive level of the hypothesis suggests that while in Carinthia the Slavs tried to adapt their structure to the attractive organisational patterns by creating a model of a state. This explanation could be included into a collection of super-inflated hypotheses, if not for certain interesting analogies. During the enthronement ceremony, the future dukes of Carinthia were clad in a peasant

¹⁰H. Łowmiański, *Początki Polski, op. cit.*, vol. V, p. 310; recently: B. Kürbis, *Historia wpisana w teraźniejszość. O "Kronice Polskiej" Mistrza Wincentego (History inscribed into the present. "On The Chronicle of Poland" by Master Wincenty)*, in: *Studia nad świadomością historyczną Polaków (Studies on Polish Historical Consciousness)*, ed. J. Topolski, Poznań 1994, p. 40 ff.

costume; Přemysl, the legendary ruler of Bohemia, was supposed to have been a peasant, and his clogs were part of important national symbols. According to Gallus, the Polish Piast was also a peasant, until Wincenty promoted him to a wheelwright. If Gallus was really concerned with elevating the prestige of the royal family, then its deduction from "ducal ploughsmen", in conditions marked by the appearance of the latifundia and the growing dependence of the peasant population on the lords, appears to be particularly curious. Already Master Wincenty must have recognised this tradition of a Slav state to be an error, but obviously a hundred years earlier it was still very much alive. Is there a rational explanation? A different solution could be sought in the proposal made by J. Banaszkie wicz¹¹, who assumes that the issue at stake was the cult of the ruler-sustainer. It is equally possible to perceive yet another archaic motif. The establishment of a state is essentially connected with the settled life of the given population. In conditions created by the Slav economy during the tribal period, the guarantor of the new social organisation was envisaged precisely as a sedentary farmer. In other words, authority among the Slavs in Carinthia was wielded by the landowner; hence, with time, this model was adopted by the Bohemians and the Poles.

The above are only suppositions; more certain appear to be speculations concerning the inclusion of our country into world history, accomplished by Master Wincenty. The chronicler not only depicted the settled population battling against classical heroes, but, similarly to other erudites of the twelfth century, he also antiquated the names of rulers and peoples. *Krak* became *Gracchus*, *Poptel* — *Pompilius*, and the *Wiślante* — the *Vandals*. This simple operation should not be treated as evidence incriminating our chronicler. After all, he never claimed that *Krak* was a member of the family of famous Roman tribunes. The associations, however, were obvious, as in the case of *Brutus*, the legendary creator of *Brittany*, whose name brought to mind the founder of the Roman Republic after the ousting of the kings. Naturally, such associations were accessible to a narrow elite, a small group of people enjoying power and knowledge, and did not become disseminated more universally until the period of growing literacy and increasingly widespread education. The fifteenth-

¹¹J. Banaszkie wicz, *Podante*, op. cit., p. 46.

century commentary to the chronicle by Master Wincenty, written by Jan Dąbrówka, as well as various lives of kings and dukes comprised the foundation of common knowledge, even more so since they differed from the main source of information about the past — the lengthy stories by Jan Długosz, at times difficult to assimilate — and assumed the form of succinct data, offering the very essence of knowledge about ancestors. Not only did such works constitute as if a password to which the reader provided the countersign¹², but they formed an almost mnemotechnical course about national history, portrayed *via* the figures of rulers. An excellent example is the proverb “the gentry perished under King Olbracht”; the same is true of the written galleries of Polish monarchs and dukes: “Łokietek (Ladislaus the Short) was of short stature but of great spirit”, “Boleslaus killed St. Stanislaus, and subsequently repented”. Such popular history, written by scholars or teachers, was intended for the widest possible group of readers. It must be added that the work *W ten czas Bolesław królował* (*This Was the Time of the Reign of Boleslaus*) is based on a rhymed office, probably written by Wincenty of Kielcza, and not on testimony of Polish collective memory concerning the *factum* of St. Stanislaus¹³.

Much of this information could have originated from speculations made in the workshops of certainly not the most outstanding scholars. Possibly, it was they who wrote that “the Poles had a forefather”, that, to cite the *Chronicle by Prokosz* once again, came to Poland “from Illyryk in the Year 3350 after the Creation of the World”, ruled for 43 years, and had six brothers, including Czech and Mazur. His predecessor was Lis, “who battled against Alexander the Great”. The recorded grandsons of this Pole were Posnań, Lublin, Lubosz, and Sandomir, who “founded towns thus named”. The successors of this family “ruled for seven hundred and sixty seven years”, to be followed by “twelve voivodes...” until “Kрак I, one of the twelve, was crowned king in the Year of the Lord 694”. Here, there appears a successive motif, also introduced by Master Wincenty: the election of the ruler. In accordance with the conception formulated by Gallus Anonymus, God made Siemowit, the son of Piast, the ruler of all Poles. Naturally,

¹² *Monumenta Poloniae Historica* [MPH], vol. II, publ. A. Bielowski, 2nd ed., Warszawa 1961, pp. 279, 281, 285, 289.

¹³ H. Samsonowicz, *Historia opowiadana o Polskim średniowieczu* (*Recounted Story about Mediaeval Poland*), “Przegląd Historyczny” 83, 1992, p. 398.

Bishop Wincenty did not negate the intervention of Providence, conceived as the prime causal force, but believed that it acted through the intermediary of the people, who chose Krak as their king by means of a free election¹⁴.

The same chronicler described an election no longer legendary, but contemporary. After a tempestuous debate, the gathered lords from the province of Cracow opposed the candidature of Mieszko the Old to the ducal throne, and chose Leszek the White, the young son of Casimir the Just. This note contains at least two data essential for our reflections. The first pertains to the existence at the end of the twelfth century of a social group which decided about the fate of the state. Those *optimates*, *barones*, and, in Polish probably *panowie* perceived the state organisation as an institution with which they identified themselves. The state was no longer the property of the ruler, but a common wealth, whose "political nation" they comprised — a group actively ruling, or co-ruling, and deciding about the future of the country. It was they who in twelfth- and thirteenth-century conditions regarded themselves as members of a community of Poles, and sought a justification of their merit in the past. The latter was to be comparable and shared with the history of other peoples and nations, who also had their own elites of power and ruling groups. During the time of Master Wincenty Polish lords postulated proximity with their foreign counterparts as regards significance, social position, and nobility, i.e. ancient origin. It is worth accentuating that the Polish lords did not attempt to prove their affinity to the great families of Europe, aware of their differences, characteristic customs, own language and past. The ennoblement of this different past was to bring them closer to the elites of Europe. They were not isolated in their efforts. An honourable past was sought by the Germans, the English and the French. Presumably, only the Italians were not compelled to produce their lineage, although in their case too knowledge about the past was rendered rather complicated due to Longobardic, Norman, and then Anjou and Aragonian arrivals. Local resear-

¹⁴ *Magistri Vincenti dicti Kadlubek Chronica Polonorum*, ed. M. Plez a, MPH, ser. II, vol. XI, Cracow 1994, p. 8 ff.; *Galli Anonimi Cronicae et gesta ducum sive principum Polonorum*, ed. K. Maleczyński, MPH, ser. I, vol. II, Cracow 1952, p. 66 ff.

chers claim that the beginning of the Italian community dates back to a period no earlier than the fall of ancient Rome¹⁵.

The second observation deals with the various visions of the beginnings of Poland as seen by Gallus and Wincenty, and refers to domestic issues. Gallus Anonymous began his narrative with Gniezno, the nest of the Polish dynasty. Master Wincenty underlined the role played by the capital castle–town of Krak. The explanation of this divergence is easy. From the time of the testament of Boleslaus the Wrymouth there were no doubts that Cracow was the main town of the Kingdom. It was just as obvious that the lords from the province of Cracow — whose names and fulfilled functions are known to us — decided to whom the throne was to be offered; in the future, they were to influence the fate of the whole country, and not only their own province. The version of the beginnings of Poland presented by Wincenty was the account required by the Cracow lords, and reflected the actual state of the Polish lands at the turn of the twelfth century. Subsequently, it became the point of departure for further supplementation and transformation, described fullest by Jan Długosz.

(Translated by Aleksandra Rodzińska–Chojnowska)

¹⁵H. Samsonowicz, *Dziedzictwo średntowiecza (The Legacy of the Middle Ages)*, Wrocław 1991, p. 9, 16.