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OLD AGE AND LONGEVITY IN MEDIEVAL POLAND AGAINST A COMPARATIVE BACKGROUND

I. Introduction

The problem of old age and old people is one of the more recent and at the same time more popular questions raised by contemporary historiography. The issue attracts historians for various reasons. Studies of the question of old age offer a chance of viewing societies of by-gone epochs from a different point than through the prism of traditional, though still viable categories of estates, classes, groups of interests, families, or local communities, etc. Since old age is a universal phenomenon, it offers us a possibility to compare societies from one sphere of civilization, or simultaneously from various periods. We can also compare communities from completely different cultures viewed through the prism of the same category. The issue of old age is also attractive because of its interdisciplinary dimension. It is the subject of research not only of historians, but also representatives of other humane studies: archaeologists, demographers, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and even aetiologists. Hence a historian can cooperate with specialists in related disciplines, and use their methods and findings concerning old age.

The need to take up this issue by a medievalist seems all the more urgent, because the problem of old age has been underestimated in research into the Polish Middle Ages. Polish historiography concerning medieval times did not focus on old age, but rather on old people. Moreover, what was taken into account was mostly their role as witnesses to the past and the whole question of old age was analysed only as a side-issue in studies of the

history of culture, law, society or economy of medieval Poland¹. Medievalist studies concerning other aspects of old age than the role of aged people as carriers of collective memory belong to exceptions. On the other hand, the problems of the aged part of Polish society were received with more understanding by the researchers into the modern era².

This article aims to answer a few questions: what was the concept of old age, who and on what grounds was regarded as an aged person, what was the opinion about longevity, and finally, how was advanced age defined in Europe and Poland of the period under discussion. While shedding light on this issue in the whole of Europe I base myself mainly on excerpts from the abundant literature on this subject. As far as Poland is concerned, I have carried out source research, which embraced mainly Mazovia, Little Poland, Great Poland with Kujawy and the Łęczyca Land, and to a smaller extent Silesia and Eastern Pomerania. Trying to get a possibly many-sided view of the above-mentioned questions, I take into account multifarious sources. Thus my queries

¹ J. T. Lubomirski, Introduction to: *Księga ziemi czerskiej (1404–1425) (The Czersk Court Book [1404–1425])* (hereafter KZCz.), ed. J. T. Lubomirski, Warszawa 1879, pp. LXIX–LXXI; K. Tymieniecki, *Sądownictwo w sprawach kmiecych a ustalanie się stanów na Mazowszu pod koniec wieków średnich (The Jurisdiction Over Peasants and Consolidation of Estates in Mazovia at the End of the Middle Ages)*, Poznań 1922, pp. 59–70; B. Geremek, *Temporal Imagination in Polish Medieval Historiography*, "Questiones Medii Aevi", vol. 2, 1981, pp. 57–58; H. Samsonowicz, *Narrative History in Medieval Poland*, in: *Society and Culture. Poland in Europe*, ed. M. Bogucka, Warszawa 1995, p. 9; W. Sieradzian, *Świadomość historyczna świadków w procesach polsko-krzyżackich w XIV i XV w. (The Historical Awareness of Witnesses in the Lawsuits between Poland and the Teutonic Order in the 14th and 15th cc.)*, Toruń 1993, pp. 30, 67, 70, 113, 145, 163; G. Myśliwski, *Człowiek średniowiecza wobec czasu i przestrzeni (Mazowsze od XII do poł. XVI w.) (Medieval Man Versus Time and Space, Mazovia from the 12th till the Middle of the 16th c.)*, Warszawa 1999, pp. 411, 416–418; idem, *Between Memory and Anticipation. Temporal Consciousness of Mazovian Society (the 12th – the mid-16th century)*, "Acta Poloniae Historica", vol. 82, 2000, pp. 20–21, 25–27.

² See lately A. Wyczański, *Opieka nad ludźmi starymi na wsi polskiej w XVI w. (The Protection of Old People in 16th c. Polish Countryside)*, in: *Biedni i bogaci. Studia z dziejów społeczeństwa i kultury ofiarowane Bronisławowi Geremekowi w sześćdziesiątą rocznicę urodzin (The Rich and the Poor. Studies in the History of Society and Culture Dedicated to Bronisław Geremek on the Sixtieth Anniversary of His Birth)*, Warszawa 1992, pp. 65–70; M. Kopczyński, *Old Age Gives No Joy? Old People in the Kujawy Countryside at the End of the 18th Century*, "Acta Poloniae Historica", vol. 78, 1998, pp. 81–102; idem, *Studia nad rodziną chłopską w Koronie w XVII–XVIII wieku (Studies of the Peasant Family in the Polish Crown in the 17th–18th cc.)*, Warszawa 1998, pp. 74–76, 147–165 (containing an extensive bibliography).

embrace selected diplomas, codes of customary law, common law and ecclesiastical statutes, records of Polish common law, royal officers', village and ecclesiastical courts, descriptions and inspections of estates, the Lublin book of boundary delimitations, Anzelm Gostomski's manual of manorial farm economy entitled *Gospodarstwo (Farming)*, as well as (Cracow) registers of bishops, chronicles, lives of the saints and collections of miracles, excerpts from armorials, yearbooks, archives of the Royal Treasury and records of the lawsuit between Poland and the Teutonic Order of 1422–1423. I leave out of account the majority of literary and learned sources, which should be examined separately. What I have in mind is mainly an insight into the more popular concept of the problem outlined above. I will focus mainly on the gentry, peasants and clergy, although the above-mentioned sources also contain mentions concerning the burghers. Only exceptionally do I touch upon the question of the age of old rulers.

II. Biological old age — gerontological, demographic and archeological findings

While attempting research into medieval old age it is worth mentioning the present views concerning the nature of ageing and old age³. These views bring to light the lack of homogeneity or uniformity of both phenomena. Gerontologists emphasize that ageing is a gradual and varied process. Not all people undergo it at the same pace, moreover it does not affect all the faculties of the same organism at the same time. It would also be difficult to indicate some biological fact common to all people that could be regarded as a universal threshold of old age. In fact, old age has many dimensions. Gerontologists specify six varieties of old age which can be reached at different stages of life; needless to say, no simultaneousness of these processes can be found in a larger group of people, either. Thus we distinguish a chronological, biological, cognitive, emotional, social and functional old age. Although the majority of these changes occur on average between the age of 60 and 70, it is considered fallacious to accept some universal chronological borderline point between adult and old age. This uncertainty is reflected in various numbers of years accepted as the criterion of old age in historical research. Its

³ S. Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, London–New York, 1997, p. 12.

thresholds have been established as 40⁴, 50⁵, 60⁶ (most frequently), but also 65 years of life⁷.

In principle, the society of medieval Europe and Poland is characterized by the demography typical of societies of the pre-industrial era⁸. The average length of life amounted to 30–35 years for men, and a little less for women. This was a result of a high death-rate among infants and mothers at child-birth. It was also a result not only of the low standard of the hygiene and medicine, but also of natural disasters, epidemics and famines, so frequent in the Middle Ages. In more prosperous regions this average age could be higher. E.g. in Florence during its economic efflorescence (1300) the average length of life was estimated at 40 years, but after the plagues of the 14th c. it fell to 18 years (1375) and only insignificantly rose in the next decades⁹. The percentage of old people in medieval society is on average estimated at 8%, i.e. almost by half smaller than at the end of the 20th c.¹⁰ However, in this respect, too, research discovered a large differentiation in medieval times. In flourishing Italian towns the percent-

⁴ M. Pelling, R. Smith, *Introduction to: Life, Death, and the Elderly. Historical Perspective* (henceforward: *Life*), ed. M. Pelling, R. Smith, London–New York 1991, p. 7.

⁵ E.g. M. Pelling, *Old Age, Poverty and Disability in Early Modern Norwich. Work, Remarriage, and Other Expedients*, in: *Life*, p. 78; *Historia kultury materialnej Polski w zarysie (The History of Polish Material Culture. An Outline)*, vol. 1, ed. M. Dembińska, Z. Podwińska, Warszawa 1978, p. 25.

⁶ E.g. J. C. Russell, *Population in Europe 500–1000*, in: *Fontana Economic History of Europe*, ed. C. M. Cipolla, London 1972, p. 42.

⁷ D. Waley, *Later Medieval Europe. From Saint Louis to Luther*, London–New York 1985, p. 244 (however, next to the threshold of 60 years).

⁸ J. C. Russell, *Population in Europe*, p. 25; idem, *The Population of the Crusader States*, in: *A History of the Crusades*, ed. K. M. Setton, vol. 5 (*The Impact of the Crusades on the Near East*), ed. N. P. Zacour, H. W. Hazard, Wisconsin 1985, p. 296; W. Kula, *Problemy i metody historii gospodarczej (The Problems and Methods of Economic History)*, Warszawa 1963, p. 455. A similar order of values (5–6%) could be observed in other pre-industrial societies of the Mediterranean basin in antiquity (W. Suder, *Sexagenarios de ponte. Ludzie starzy w rodzinie i społeczeństwie rzymskim w świetle prawa (Sexagenarios de ponte. Old People in the Roman Family and Society in the Light of Law)*, in: *Starożytny Rzym we współczesnych badaniach. Państwo — społeczeństwo — gospodarka (Ancient Rome in Current Research. State — Society — Economy)*, ed. J. Wolski, T. Kotula, A. Kunisz, Kraków 1994, p. 319. See respective data for Poland *Historia*, p. 25.

⁹ S. Shahar, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33; P. Borscheid, *Geschichte des Alters (16–18. Jahrhundert)*, Münster 1987, p. 7; G. Minois, *Histoire de la vieillesse. De l'Antiquité à la Renaissance*, Paris 1987, p. 15; J. P. Bois, *Histoire de la vieillesse*, Paris 1994, pp. 110–111.

age of people who were over 60 reached 14.6–16.2% (Florence, Ravenna, Arezzo)¹¹. On the other hand in medieval Scandinavia the percentage of old people is said to have reached barely 2–2.5 %, although there is a large differentiation of age data in cemeteries (1–11%)¹². There is similar oscillation in Polish data, although the share of people over 50 did not surpass 7%¹³. Despite much worse conditions of life in medieval times, research has shown that particular individuals lived up to the age comparable with seniors nowadays¹⁴.

Hence, it would be interesting to check whether the medieval and early-modern demographic realities, so different from ours, produced, as some researchers suggest, an equally different concept of old age, as well as its different chronological criterion¹⁵.

III. The concept of old age in medieval and early-modern Europe

1. Old age criteria in European intellectual-literary tradition

Medieval reflection on old age took its source from the Judaic-Christian and Greek-Roman tradition. Some fragments of the *Bible*, Greek thought, the achievements of Romans and the *Talmud* contain mentions on advanced age, on reaching which the status of man changed in some way. One can distinguish here three age thresholds: 50, 60, and 70 years. The first is the least frequent. According to my information it appeared only in *The Book of Numbers*¹⁶, in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*¹⁷ and in Plutarch's writings¹⁸. The threshold of 70 years was much more

¹¹ G. Minois, *op. cit.*, pp. 292–293; S. Shahar, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

¹² M. Kopczyński in his review of O. J. Benedictov's *The Medieval Demographic System of the Northern Countries*, Oslo 1993, "Zapiski Historyczne", vol. 61, 1996, p. 116.

¹³ According to some estimates this percentage oscillated between 5–7% (*Historia*, p. 25), according to others — only 3–5% (see J. Tyszkiewicz, *Ludzie i przyroda w Polsce średniowiecznej (People and Nature in Medieval Poland)*, Warszawa 1983, p. 177); see also J. Tyszkiewicz, *Problematyka demograficzna w 'Miracula polskich z XIII i XIV stulecia (Demographic Issues in Polish 13th and 14th c. 'Miracula)*, "Collegium Polonorum", vol. 7, 1985/1986, p. 165.

¹⁴ J. C. Russell, *British Medieval Population*, Albuquerque 1948, p. 192; *idem*, *Population in Europe*, p. 44; P. Borscheid, *op. cit.*, p. 18. For Poland see J. Tyszkiewicz, *Ludzie*, pp. 177–178; *idem*, *Problematyka*, pp. 164, 176, note 44 (here data based on written sources).

¹⁵ P. Borscheid, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

¹⁶ S. Shahar, *op. cit.*, p. 29 (see especially 8: 24–26; also 4:3).

¹⁷ J. P. Bois, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁸ G. Minois, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

popular. It was mentioned in the psalms¹⁹ as well as other passages of the *Old*²⁰ and *New Testament*²¹, as well as in the Roman Law of the late Empire²². However, 60 years was definitely the most popular criterion of old age. It was mentioned in this, or approximate sense in: *Leviticus*²³, works of Pythagoras and the poetry of Mimnermus of Colophon²⁴, various regulations of Roman Law of the royal, republican and early empire period²⁵ as well as the Talmudic *Book of Fathers (Abot)*²⁶.

Medieval learning and literature is marked by an incomparably greater diversity, hence the inhomogeneity of its concept of old age. Its terminology (mainly Latin) is very ambiguous. This can be exemplified by the word *senectus*, which was used to define either the period following directly young age, or even later stages of life²⁷. The earlier stage of ageing had still another name, *gravitas*²⁸, which sometimes also defined the last stage²⁹. Another definition of old age — *senium* — was used with incomparably greater consistency. The majority of authors described in this way the final period of life³⁰. Sometimes it was called otherwise — *senies*³¹, *etas decrepita* or *etas minuendī*³².

Terminological differentiation did not match the multiplicity of concepts of the chronological threshold of old age. It was established as 35, 40, 45, 49, 50, 58, 60, 70 and 72 years³³. This diversity was due to the frequent separation of the period of earlier

¹⁹ Psalm 89, 10; see A. Unterman, *Dictionary of Jewish Lore and Legend*, London 1991, p. 14.

²⁰ A. Unterman, *ibid.*

²¹ The First Epistle of St. Paul to Timothy 5:9 (S. Shahar, *op. cit.*, p. 29).

²² W. Suder, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

²³ *Lev.*, 27: 3, 7 (also 27: 1-7, S. Shahar, *op. cit.*, p. 6).

²⁴ G. Minois, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-77, 88.

²⁵ See W. Suder, *op. cit.*, pp. 319, 324, 325-327; S. Shahar, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

²⁶ G. Minois, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

²⁷ S. Shahar, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁹ K. Pomian, *Przeszłość jako przedmiot wiary (The Past as the Subject of Belief)*, Warszawa 1968, p. 103.

³⁰ S. Shahar, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

³¹ G. Minois, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

³² S. Shahar, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

³³ All the divisions of human life presented below and views on old age are cited from: J. Le Goff, *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval*, Paris 1964, p. 213; P. Borscheid, *op. cit.*, p. 33; S. Shahar, *op. cit.*, p. 13; G. Minois, *op. cit.*, pp. 68, 168, 225-227; J. P. Bois, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29, 50.

old age from its later stage — senioral decrepitude. The end of the first stage and at the same time the beginning of the second was established as 49, 50, 60, 70 and exceptionally 72 or 100 years. Just as in the ancient tradition, six decades were the most popular solution, while seventy years was a little less widespread measure. Only *Maimonides* connected acknowledging a person as old with his/her sense of being one. According to the Jewish scholar a woman was old if she did not protest against such a qualification. Regardless of the fact that the majority of medieval intellectuals did not recognize individual differences in the process of ageing, many of the above theories may be regarded as not contradictory to biological probability. One should bear in mind, however, that they resulted not only from empiric facts but also from symbolic-mathematical combinations, sometimes connected with astrology³⁴, which were partly taken over from Antiquity. Human life was divided into 3–6 stages, sometimes of the same length, which led to a mechanical designation of the chronological threshold of old age. It is striking that numbers used were almost exclusively evened up to a multiple of 10. However, the above examples of precise division of human life (and old age) in years were in a minority. According to *N. Orme*, what dominated in medieval writings was a simple division of the period of human existence into three stages: youth, maturity and precisely old age, the criterion of which was not defined in years³⁵.

Deliberations on longevity are a separate question. The banal statement that it is finished by death, the moment of which it is impossible to foresee, did not satisfy everybody. Some intellectuals and writers of the period under discussion attempted to establish a universal end of human life. Despite various results of these deliberations they should be regarded not so much as an intellectual pastime, but as the product of serious reflection upon longevity and, sometimes, as the effect of a new belief in the possibility of quantifying everything. The deliberations from the period under examination known to me do not go beyond the

³⁴ So did the famous late-medieval chronicler, *Jean de Froissart*. In his work *Le Joli Buisson de jonece* he connected the stages of human life to the planets and original calculations. According to them the most advanced stages would be between 46–58 years (*S. Shahar, op. cit.*, p. 16). For early modern times see also *P. Borscheid, op. cit.*, p. 33.

³⁵ *N. Orme, Sufferings of the Clergy, Illness and Old Age in Exeter Diocese (1300–1540)*, in: *Life*, p. 62.

bounds of probability. These bounds have been established by current findings of gerontologists who estimate that in especially favourable circumstances the human organism can live up to 110 years³⁶. This boundary has been raised by the surprising discoveries of the skeletons of extremely long-lived persons in Africa (120 years)³⁷. This was the limit recognized by St. Augustine, who, of all authors known to me, accepted the highest barrier of human life, precisely twelve decades³⁸. Medieval authors more frequently accepted lower temporal boundaries — 80, 100 years³⁹. Similar reflections upon longevity were born in the modern era⁴⁰. However, not all people were convinced of the possibility to live up to a really old age. E.g. Pope Innocent III expressed a pessimistic view that in his time few people lived up to 60 years, and still fewer — up to 70⁴¹. However, the above-mentioned archeological findings contradict this. Moreover, the existing written data say persons of both sexes lived up to the advanced age of 80 — even up to over 100 years⁴².

On the other hand some literary presentations of the length of human life were purely a product of imagination and a reflection of dreams about longevity (and immortality). The upper limit of mythical images was designated by the biblical Methuselah, who was said to have lived 969 years⁴³. Medieval literature abounded in examples of longevity as well⁴⁴. Effective exemplifi-

³⁶ G. Minois, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 118. According to the latest data, currently the oldest person with a written confirmation of her date of birth was a 114 year old Englishwoman (cf. "Gazeta Telewizyjna TVP", 02.03.2000, p. 134).

³⁸ J. P. Bois, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

³⁹ G. Minois, *op. cit.*, p. 227; J. P. Bois, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁴⁰ See P. Borscheid, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-34.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴² J. C. Russell, *British Medieval Population*, pp. 192-193; *idem*, *Population in Europe*, p. 44; *idem*, *Medieval Regions and Their Cities*, Bloomington 1972, p. 114; M. Pelling, *op. cit.*, p. 79; G. Minois, *op. cit.*, pp. 205-206, 213-214, 238, 273; S. Shahr, pp. 102, 126; it is worth adding that in the milieus of crusaders in the Holy Land no individuals older than 70 have been found, while the Muslims lived even up to 97 years (J. C. Russell, *The Population of the Crusader States*, p. 297). On the other hand many data derived from narration would require verification, as e.g. those concerning extremely long-lived saints — stylites, mentioned by J. C. Russell (*Late Medieval and Ancient Population*, "Transactions of the American Philosophical Society", vol. 48, fasc. 3, Philadelphia 1958, pp. 34, 143).

⁴³ For a list of extremely long-lived biblical figures, see G. Minois, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.

cations are provided by the works from the cycle of Arthurian legends, in whose conjured up world time passed quite differently, and people lived incomparably longer. There is an eloquent passage from Chrétien de Troyes' famous poem about Perceval (2nd half of the 12th c.). When one of the knights of the Round Table, Gawain, told some queen about king Arthur's good health, she answered: *Sur ma parole, monseigneur, c'est à juste titre, le roi Arthur n'est encore qu'un enfant: s'il a cent ans, ce n'est pas plus, il ne peut pas en avoir plus*⁴⁵. The number in such cases only performed the function of an effective expression, which very frequently occurred in medieval culture.

On the other hand, legal regulations, sometimes containing instructions concerning aged people, were much closer to everyday life.

2. Old age in medieval and early-modern European law

Even barbarian laws distinguished age categories, on which the measure of punishment for homicide perpetrated on a given person depended. For aged people the following divisions were accepted: for men 50–60 and over 65 years; for women 40–60 and over 60 years⁴⁶. This, however, was not a universal practice in earlier medieval times. E.g. the Russo-Byzantine treaty of 944 mentions simply old people (стары) besides mature, young ones (with the isolation of young women) and children⁴⁷. It provides no criterion in years, although the above-mentioned passage concerned ransoming Christian captives by the Emperor of Byzantium, and rates depended on the age of captured people.

Advanced age was defined in years much more frequently in the codes of statutory law composed between the 12th and the beginning of the 16th c. They come from the territory of narrowly-conceived Western Europe (without Scandinavia and Central Europe), as well as from the colonial states established in the Holy Land by the crusaders. The problem of old people together with attempts to establish their minimal age appeared in eight

⁴⁴ E.g. in 13th c. *Queste del Saint Graal*, Mordred was punished by having to live up to 400 years for approaching St. Graal (S. Shahaar, *op. cit.*, p. 8).

⁴⁵ Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Conte du Graal ou le Roman de Perceval*, tr. Ch. Méla. Paris 1990, p. 567. The original text runs: *Par foi, sire, ce n'est pas torz, / Qu'il est anfes, li roi Artus / S'il a C anz, n'a mie plus / Ne plus n'en puet il pas avoir* (*ibid.*, p. 566).

⁴⁶ S. Shahaar, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁴⁷ *Die Nestor-Chronik*, ed. D. Tschizewskij, Wiesbaden 1969, p. 49.

kinds of cases: doing military service, personal participation in ordeals, doing guard duty, performing public functions, taking an oath of allegiance to the emperor (in the case of north-Italian cities), doing menial jobs, tax charges and judicial punishments.

The most numerous and perhaps most eloquent on the matter in question are resolutions concerning the minimal age, on reaching which one was exempted from military service⁴⁸. This was either declared directly or by contrast, i.e. the definition of the maximal age of people obliged to fight. My information shows that only two numbers were used: 60 and 70 years. The first of the above-mentioned criteria of old age can be found in *Libri feudorum* (12th c.) of Lombardy, in the feudal law of the Kingdom of Jerusalem (the 12th c. *assise sur la ligece*), in England (Westminster Statutes of Edward I from 1285 and Henry VII from 1503) as well as in Venice (1338). However, the boundary of 70 years was not less frequent, as it happened in Modena (acts of the 12th c. and of 1308), in 13th c. Kingdom of Castile and Leon (the laws of Alfonso X), and in late-medieval Venice (1338) and Florence (before 1348).

Of identical significance were decrees concerning exemption from personal participation in ordeals, which frequently consisted in duels⁴⁹. Legislators were unanimous in this question despite their territorial distance (Scotland, Sicily under the Hohenstaufens, southern and northern France, northern Spain and the Kingdom of Jerusalem). All these resolutions accorded those over 60 years of age the right to propose a substitute in ordeals.

Similarly persons over 60 years old were exempted from service as night guards in 13th c. Paris. On the other hand, a higher threshold was adopted in the law of Italian Lucca, where people could withdraw from serving as guards only at 70⁵⁰.

As far as holding offices and performing public functions were concerned, generally a higher threshold of 70 years prevailed⁵¹. Let us recall again the Westminster Statutes of 1285, on the strength of which persons above that age were dismissed from work in lower lawcourts. Also in some north-Italian cities regu-

⁴⁸ J. C. Russell, *Medieval Regions*, pp. 65–66; J. S. Critchley, *Feudalism*, London 1978, p. 210; S. Shahar, *op. cit.*, pp. 25–26.

⁴⁹ S. Shahar, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

lations were issued which enabled persons at 70 or older to resign from work on the councils and in the diplomacy of the republics (Florence, Venice, Pisa). Only in Lucca was a surprisingly low age criterion adopted that enabled a person over 55 years of age to refuse being elected to a public office.

The fact of reaching the age of 70 sometimes freed one from onerous political obligations. This is shown by the peace treaty of Constance (1183), on the strength of which only the citizens of the cities belonging to the Lombard League who were under 70 had to take an oath of allegiance to Emperor Frederick Barbarossa⁵². An identical age limit was then adopted in an analogous agreement between the Emperor and Italian Alessandria⁵³.

Decrees on taxes, labour and penalties apply almost exclusively and unanimously the criterion of 60 years⁵⁴. Thus the laws of Florence and Pisa of the beginning of the 14th c. did not embrace with taxation their citizens over 60 years of age (let us note, however, that the age threshold concerning countryside regions of those republics was less favourable, and was established as 70 years). On the other hand at Rheims during the Hundred Years' War, 60 years was adopted as the age boundary above which citizens were exempted from taxation. Similarly, menial duties did not oblige persons over 60, whether in 14th–16th c. England (the *Statute of Labourers* of 1351, numerous local regulations concerning menial jobs), or in Cyprus under the Venetian rule (1489 — 1571). The Statutes of Henry VII, King of England, contemporary with the Cyprian regulations, adopted the same age criterion concerning beggars and vagrants. Old people from the margins of society received more lenient punishment than their younger companions in distress.

Age thresholds from the above-mentioned documents of statutory law seem faithfully to reflect the more widespread views on the criteria of old age⁵⁵. In contrast to the concepts of

⁵² S. Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals. The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted*, Oxford 1995, p. 239.

⁵³ E. Wies, *Fryderyk Barbarossa. Mit i rzeczywistość (Frederick Barbarossa. Myth and Reality)*, tr. W. Radwański, Warszawa 1996, p. 258.

⁵⁴ S. Shahar, *op. cit.*, pp. 26–27; M. Pelling, R. Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 6–7.

⁵⁵ From among the works that I know only M. Pelling expressed the opinion that in mid–16th c. England the threshold of old age was rather identified with 50 than 60 (*op. cit.*, p. 78). However, the contemporary legal sources from the territory of England do not corroborate that view.

intellectuals who tried to establish its universal threshold by reconciling biological realities with pre-medieval intellectual tradition and aesthetizing mathematics, symbolism of numbers and astronomy, lawyers were directed by different premisses. Although it cannot be assumed arbitrarily that they did not know intellectual-literary concepts of old age, yet in the legal regulations of this question they had to be directed by pragmatism. The concepts of the division of human life and longevity invented by scholars and writers did not have any social consequences, but the legislators' ignorance in this question would have large-scale negative consequences for the totality of population. Hence I think that for the creators of the above-mentioned laws, practical experience was the most important basis for establishing the threshold of old age. Good physical condition was indispensable for the performance of the majority of duties the fulfilment of which, according to the law, depended on age. It was hard to serve in the army or as a town guard or effectively do menial jobs, without suitable stamina. The advanced age of a participant in a judicial combat would determine its result in advance, which would deprive of any value this specific method of proving somebody's guilt or innocence. Physical efficiency was certainly important in the case of other questions as well — paying a tax was possible if a tax-payer could earn this money by his own work; excessively severe sanctions, inadequate to the old age of the punished vagrants and beggars, could be too painful for them to bear. In both cases, it seems, the humanitarian attitude of legislators could here play a part. The exclusion of aged persons from performing high social functions was probably dictated not only by the strenuous character of this work. It cannot be ruled out that a fear of the mental disability of aged officials and diplomats made legislators include the question of advanced age in their regulations. The pragmatism and realism of legal regulations is also reflected in the height of particular age thresholds. In contrast to many scholarly and literary concepts whose authors suspected old age to start much below 60 years, legal regulations of the High and Late Middle Ages only sporadically accepted a younger age (55 years) as its criterion. The most widespread were the thresholds of 60 or 70 years (or over 60/70, i.e. 61, or 71 years), which was close to the average, common experience.

All the above-mentioned numbers were arbitrarily designated by educated people: scholars, artists and legislators. However, it would be interesting to know how the aged members of society from outside the cultural élite of the period under examination defined the length of their own lives. According to M. Pelling a person who was not able to tell his/her age was considered to be weak-minded⁵⁶. However, was the precise knowledge of one's own age universal? The answer to this question was sought in lawcourt records, minutes of canonization trials and censuses, which appeared in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages⁵⁷. The majority of people, when asked about their age, mentioned some numbers⁵⁸. However, their precision and credibility was a separate question. Attention has been paid to the fact that almost all the interrogated people evened up these numbers to a multiple of 10 regardless of the fact whether they were interrogated in the course of the canonization trial of St. Ivo, or in the course of a dispute over the borders of North-Italian bishoprics, or during the census in Norwich⁵⁹. Sometimes they told their age with precision up to 5 years. Thus both in the former and in the latter case years were either added, or subtracted. Rarely could people tell the number of years of their lives with the precision up to one year. Most frequently about 60 years were mentioned, and almost as frequently 50 or 40 years. These estimates were reached in various ways. One of them was an arbitrary estimate of the age of the interrogated person, made by officials who were directed exclusively by this person's looks ("as the look of his body indicates")⁶⁰. On other occasions this age was established due to special procedures of age assessment, known e.g. in England ("proofs of age")⁶¹. This consisted in summoning witnesses and making them recall the facts that occurred more or less simultaneously with the birth of the given person. The interested person himself was doubtless interrogated in the same way, if he/she was unable to tell his age on his own. However, he/she was frequently able to do it. Nevertheless, the credibility

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁵⁷ G. Minois, *op. cit.*, p. 388 ff.

⁵⁸ M. Pelling, *op. cit.*, p. 79; G. Minois, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

⁵⁹ See respectively: G. Minois, *op. cit.*, pp. 240-241; S. Shahar, *op. cit.*, p. 83; M. Pelling, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-79.

⁶⁰ G. Minois, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 241-242.

of the numbers mentioned, especially in the latter case, could be doubted. In this matter of great help is J. Delumeau's study of the border dispute of bishops of Siena and Arezzo in 1177–1180. Participation of aged witnesses, who told how old they were, was here indispensable. However, Delumeau was in possession of data that made possible a verification of their evidence. His research shows that witnesses did not provide information that would be completely contradictory to the actual state of affairs. Still, they were old, but not as old as they maintained. Among eight witnesses who said they were a hundred years old the youngest was 75 and the oldest was merely 90⁶².

All the above-mentioned data were revealed due to external inspiration. A question arises, then, whether in everyday and non-official life the awareness of the number of the years of somebody's life was of equal significance. It seems that the attitude to one's own age differed depending on the period and social status. Let us recall the well-known findings of historians from the "Annales" school about a considerable growth of the temporal awareness and the ability to count that could be observed among wider ranks of society only beginning with the 13th c.⁶³ The above-quoted data from lawcourt sessions, canonization investigations and interrogations conducted for the census have led us to certain conclusions on the matter of our interest. Not all the interrogated people were able to tell their age with equal facility and precision. The clergy and the gentry managed to do it much better than peasants⁶⁴. In folk culture time was conceived differently because of a poorer reception of ecclesiastical chronology, and a more lively and richer natural-biological chronometry⁶⁵. Another reason was the role of manual work in peasants' life, which also determined the concept of the time of human life in the countryside. This has been wonderfully explained by G. Minois: *Le paysan médiévale ne découpe pas la vie en tranches, (...). Du début à la fin, il y a le travail de la terre, et tout s'ordonne donc autour de la force de travail, ce qui ne laisse subsister que trois périodes: la petite enfance, ou l'individu est*

⁶² S. Shahar, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

⁶³ A. Guryevich, *Srednevekovyi mir. Kultura bezmolstvuyeshchevo bolshinstva*, Moskva 1990, pp. 53, 67–69, 82.

⁶⁴ S. Shahar, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

⁶⁵ A. Guryevich, *op. cit.*, pp. 52, 63.

*improductif, la vie adulte, qui commence des que l'ont peut aider aux champs et qui se termine lorsqu'on est trop perclus et décrépité pour semer ou moissonner. Alors commence la véritable vieillesse, sans doute plus tard que dans les théories aristocratiques. La soixante sonne peut-être la retraite du guerrier, certainement pas celle du moissonneur*⁶⁶. Since peasants made up about 80–90% of society in medieval Europe, it can be doubted whether the earlier-mentioned thresholds of old age were universally known. Where they were included in the legal regulations, which also concerned the countryside, we can assume their reception was a little wider. In other cases it should probably be accepted that the knowledge of chronological criteria of old age was limited to intellectual and urban milieus.

IV. Chronological old age in Poland

1. The thresholds of old age and its terminology

Polish medieval writings do not contain many deliberations on the threshold of old age expressed in years. A relatively early appearance of some concept of this subject seems to be indicated by the well-known passage about Boleslaus the Curly in Master Vincent's work. While writing about the death of this ruler in 1173, Master Vincent said that the prince *Decessit (...) etate matura, non devexa (...)*⁶⁸. According to various findings Boleslaus' age at the moment of his death was from 48 to 55 years⁶⁹, although more recent literature on the subject gives 1122 or 1121 as the date of birth of Boleslaus the Wrymouth's second son⁷⁰. Consequently, Boleslaus the Curly would be 51–52 at the moment of his death. Other data lacking, one can only say that for Master Vincent old age started above 48–55 years. However, we

⁶⁶ G. Minois, *op. cit.*, pp. 227–228.

⁶⁷ N. J. G. Pounds, *An Economic History of Medieval Europe*, New York 1974.

⁶⁸ *Magistri Vincenti dicti Kadłubek Chronica Polonorum* (henceforward: *Magistri Vincentii*), ed. M. Plezia, "Monumenta Poloniae Historica" (series nova) (henceforward: MPH, s.n.), vol. IX, Kraków 1994, lib. III, cap. 30, p. 128; K. Jasiński, *Rodowód pierwszych Piastów (The Genealogy of the First Piasts)*, Warszawa 1992, p. 227.

⁶⁹ See respectively: O. Balzer, *Genealogia Piastów (The Genealogy of the Piasts)*, Kraków 1895, p. 156; A. Małeckie, *Testament Krzywoustego (Boleslaus the Wrymouth's Testament)*, "Pamiętnik Naukowy i Literacki", vol. 4, 1876, p. 20.

⁷⁰ See G. Labuda, *Uzupełnienia do genealogii Piastów w szczególności śląskich (Supplement to the Genealogy of the Piasts, Especially Silesian)*, "Sobótka", vol. 17, 1963, p. 10; K. Jasiński, *op. cit.*, pp. 225, 227.

do not know whether Master Vincent had precise information on the age of the deceased ruler, or estimated it by instinct. Similar conclusions can be based on the record in *Kronika Wielkopolska* (*The Great-Poland's Chronicle*) about the age of Boleslaus the Wrymouth at the moment of his death. The chronicler says that the conqueror of Pomerania was *plus labore preliorum confractus quam senio confectus*⁷¹ at the end of his life. In the same chapter the author estimates the age of the deceased prince at 56 years⁷². This shows clearly that for the author of *The Great-Poland's Chronicle* natural old age started later. On the other hand, according to Jan Długosz old age came between 60 and 70 years. While recording the death of the sixty six year old Oleśnicki, the Canon of Cracow estimated that his patron *longam (...) vite (...) impelsset (implesset) etatem*⁷³. However, we do not know whether the most outstanding historian of the Polish Middle Ages had a clear view on the subject of the precise boundary between maturity and old age.

For the same reason the first place in precisely defining the threshold of old age in Polish writings should be accorded to an anonymous 15th c. parish priest, probably a Hussite by persuasion⁷⁴. This clergyman distinguished three stages of human maturity and defined their limits in years: *Manstwo ad 50 annum, staroscz ad 70, skyszaloszcz usque ad mortem* ("Manhood ad 50 annum, old age ad 70, senility until death")⁷⁵. What is striking here is the division of the period beginning with 50 years of age into two parts, which finds some antecedence in the *Bible*⁷⁶. For

⁷¹ *Chronica Poloniae Maioris*, MPH s.n., vol. VIII, ed. B. Kürbis, Warszawa 1970, cap. 30, p. 48.

⁷² Currently it is estimated that this ruler lived up to 54 (K. Maleczyński, *Bolesław III Krzywousty (Boleslaus III the Wrymouth)*, Wrocław 1975, p. 340).

⁷³ *Katalog Jana Długosza (Jan Długosz's Catalogue, henceforward: KJDł)*, in: *Katalogi biskupów krakowskich (Registers of Cracow Bishops)*, (henceforward: KBKra.), MPH, s.n., vol. X, part 2, ed. J. Szymański, Warszawa 1974, pp. 221–222, see also note [35] hr-hr, p. 222.

⁷⁴ A. Brückner, *Kazania husyty polskiego (A Polish Hussite's Homilies)*, "Prace Filologiczne", vol. 4, ed. J. Baudouin de Courtenay et al., Warszawa 1892–1893, p. 569; for the author of the classification under discussion see *ibid.*, pp. 562, 565.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 569.

⁷⁶ (...) *dies annorum nostrorum in ipsis septuaginta anni si autem octoginta anni et quod amplius est labor et dolor (...)* (Psalm 89, 10). See also *Numbers*, where the age of 50 is also the upper age limit for the ministry (8, 25) (S. Shahaar, *op. cit.*, p. 6).

the Polish Hussite the term "old age" does not signify the last stage of life, but probably the latest period in which an old person could on average be still active. On the other hand he terms the last stage of life as *skisłość*, interpreted by linguists as "decrepitude, disability"⁷⁷. This division of old age strikes us by the inhomogeneity of its criteria. The rigid quantitative limit has been combined here with an individual qualitative determinant, i.e. disability, which either did not affect everybody, or affected only some at various ages. So the question arises here as to the popularity of the above-mentioned view and its eventual reflection in terminology. It should be stressed outright that the terms qualifying old age do not make up either a formally rich or numerous set. A part of the vocabulary of our interest refers to old age generally and does not seem to reflect any conviction of the dichotomic division of the autumn of life (*canities*⁷⁸, *senectutas*⁷⁹, *antiqua aetas*⁸⁰, *aetas*⁸¹, Pol.: *starość*⁸²). In the sources I examined there are also other terms which seem to result from the realization of two stages of old age following one another: *starość* and *skisłość*. So let us mention in the first place the word *senium*⁸³, which should not be understood differently than in Western Europe, i.e. as very advanced old age. An identical meaning should be given to the terms *extrema senecta*⁸⁴ and *senectutem decrepitam*⁸⁵, the more so because in both cases they referred to a person a lot over 70. Therefore *decrepitas*⁸⁶ should

⁷⁷ *Słownik staropolski (Old-Polish Dictionary, henceforward: SStarop.)*, vol. 8, ed. S. Urbańczyk, Wrocław 1981, p. 233.

⁷⁸ *Magistri Vincentii*, lib. I, cap. 5, p. 10.

⁷⁹ *Ioanni de Czarnkow Chronicon Polonorum (henceforward: Ioanni de Czarnkow)*, MPH, vol. 2, ed. J. Szlachetowski, Kraków 1872, cap. 18, p. 652.

⁸⁰ R. Lubicz, *Głosy polskie (Polish Glosses)*, "Sprawozdania Komisji Językowej AU", vol. 5, Kraków 1894, p. 263.

⁸¹ Only in the sense of old age: *aetas* = *starość* in a 15th c. MS (J. Łoś, *Przegląd językowych zabytków staropolskich do r. 1543 (A Review of the Relics of the Old Polish Language up till 1543)*, Kraków 1915, p. 518).

⁸² SStarop., vol. 8, p. 421.

⁸³ E.g. *Lites ac Res gestae inter Polonos Ordinemque Cruciferorum (henceforward: Lites-1422/23)*, vol. II, ed. T. Działyński, Poznań 1855, p. 117; *Ioannis Długossi Vita sancti Stanislai (VSStan. ~JDł.)*, in: *Ioannis Długossi senioris Opera*, ed. I. Polkowski, P. Żegota, Kraków 1887, p. 161; *Acta Capituli Poznaniensis (henceforward: ACPoz.)*, in: *Acta capitulorum necnon iudiciorum ecclesiasticorum selecta (henceforward: ACNIE)*, ed. B. Ulanowski, vol. 1, Kraków 1894, rec. 915-1500, p. 172.

⁸⁴ *KJDł.*, p. 249, 259.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

also be regarded as synonymous with disability. Although the above-mentioned terms appear in the sources, it seems that the division of old age into two stages did not have many followers in the literate strata of Polish society (the majority of the words quoted are derived exclusively from ecclesiastical sources). This conclusion seems all the more justified because only a few were able to conceive advanced age in abstract terms, i.e. such as *starość* and its derivatives, and not by describing concrete people as old. Therefore the division into two stages was even more rare. Nevertheless, the above-presented old age terminology does not show clearly whether its users at the same time made avail of some chronological determinants of old age.

If we want to answer the question about old age thresholds in Poland expressed in years, we should take into account the evidence from sources which contain both epithets pertaining to old age and the age of a given person expressed in years. We should also examine records referring to old age that do not say how many years a given person lived, but whose age in years can be established on the basis of other data. We will be interested in examples concerning persons not younger than 50, i.e. the minimal old age threshold from the anonymous parish priest's classification. In the sources under my analysis I have not come across a mention which would confirm the recognition of this age as old. Thus old age must have been identified with longer life. According to J. Tyszkiewicz this was 60 years: "Since in the middle of the 15th c. people over 60 were described as «old» (...) and earlier the beginning of old age certainly oscillated around 60 years of life, we accept this age as the boundary between maturity and old age for the Polish Middle Ages in general"⁸⁷. While subscribing to this view I think that its confirmation can rather be found in different sources than those invoked by the author of the above quotation⁸⁸. A later record, containing a

⁸⁶ *Słowniczek łacińsko-polski wyrazów prawa magdeburckiego z wieku XV (Latin-Polish Glossary of Magdeburg Law, 15th c.)*, ed. Z. Celichowski, Poznań 1875, p. 3; I quote from *SStarop.*, vol. 8, p. 421.

⁸⁷ J. Tyszkiewicz, *Problematyka*, p. 155.

⁸⁸ To confirm his statement the author invoked the figures from miracles N° 15, 39, 56 described in the work on Prandot (*ibid.*). Because the author does not analyse these records precisely, I can only make some conjectures. The passages he mentions do not contain, in my opinion, any information that would unequivocally confirm recognizing sexagenarians as old people. A miner from Bochnia is described as *maturus*, but we rather associate this word with adulthood or

comprehensive assessment of the age of the person it describes seems to me much more reliable. The record in question is one of the ecclesiastical court at Pułtusk, which in 1499 investigated the case of the battery of the provost of Lwów, Jan Myszkowski. The injured party was described as *nobilis homoque senex et decrepitus, annorum LX citra vel ultra*⁸⁹. From among all the examples known to us where both old age terms and the age in years were mentioned, the above record contains a mention of the shortest period of life. Therefore we accept that for those who conceived of old age mainly in terms of chronology, it was 60 years precisely that was the minimal criterion of old age. The boundary of 50 years mentioned by the pro-Hussite parish priest was not considered of any significance by anybody. Thus what remains for us to do is to analyse records about people aged 60 or over.

2. Methods of defining old age — chronological conventions and sources of information

It seems necessary, however, to outline the history of interest in the age of old people. It should be emphasized that in contrast to frequent examples of citing the length of children's lives (e.g. Gallus Anonymus' *Gesta*, the lives of St. Stanislaus, *Cuda św. Stanisława* [St. Stanislaus' Miracles], *Żywot św. Jadwigi* [St. Hedwig's Life]), as well as the threshold of years of efficiency (e.g. Casimir's Statutes, Sochaczew Statute of 1377), similar endeavours concerning old age were late to gain popularity in Poland. The earliest example known to me appeared, it must be admitted, as early as 1254. It was then that *Rocznik kapituły krakowskiej* (Cracow Chapter Yearbook) recorded the death of the knight

mental maturity (mentioned to support the credibility of his account), *Miracula venerabilis patris Prandote episcopi Cracoviensis* (henceforward: *MVPrand.*), MPH, vol. 4, ed. W. Kętrzyński, Kraków 1884, p. 499). On the other hand, the information that he was *unus ex senioribus de Bochnya* does not concern his age, but his position in the group of work-mates. Another witness (N° 39, pp. 482–483) was said to be 70, so it is pointless to use his case as confirmation of the otherwise right thesis that 60 years was a socially accepted threshold of old age. More eloquent is the testimony of a woman aged 60, whose husband *etiam senio confectus laborare valde parum potest* (N° 15, p. 460). However, this mention relates to the woman's husband, whose age remains unknown. The indirect character of this evidence (the word *etiam*) weakens it, though does not undermine it completely. In fact it testifies to the emergence of the view that people aged 60 could be recognized as old. A 60 year old miner described as *maturus* (provided this was the definition of his age) proves that this was not a rule.

⁸⁹ *Acta iudicii ecclesiastici Plocensis* (henceforward: *AIEPloc.*), in: *ACNIE*, vol. III, part 1, Kraków 1908, rec. 178–1499, p. 69; cf. *Zbiór dokumentów i listów miasta Płocka* (The Town of Płock Collection of Documents and Letters), vol. 2 (henceforward: *ZDMł. II*), ed. S. M. Szacherska, Warszawa 1987, N° 489–1545, p. 290.

Gedka *qui centum vel amplius annorum senex exstitit*⁹⁰. Nevertheless, the above mention as well as the passage on Boleslaus the Wrymouth from *The Great-Polish Chronicle* and the passage from Jan ko of Czarnków's chronicle about the length of life of Elizabeth, Ladislaus the Short's daughter (80 years) and Gniezno archbishop Jarosław Bogoria of Skotniki (100 years)⁹¹ had long remained to be exceptions in Polish writings. The mentioning of old age did not become widespread until the 15th c. The earliest examples appear in the records of the lawsuit between Poland and the Teutonic Order in 1422–23⁹² and in three documents containing testimonies concerning the border between the Kingdom of Poland and the New Margraviate (1422)⁹³. In the course of the lawsuit with the Order, records included the age of witnesses, and the latter sometimes cited the age of their elderly informants. Among 29 witnesses of the Polish party, 18 were aged 60 or over. This should be enlarged by 9 persons — informants, whose old age (sometimes fantastic) was also defined in years, as well as by generally described “numerous” inhabitants of the Chełmno land aged about 100 (*a quampluribus incolis illius terre culmensis antiquis fere centenariis*⁹⁴). Later examples of citing advanced age in years come from the territory of Little Poland and Great Poland of the 1450s⁹⁵. So one can recapitulate that apart from the above-mentioned exceptions from the 13th–14th cc., individual data on old age cited in years appeared in the following types of sources: records of the lawsuit between Poland and the Teutonic Order of 1422–23, documents registering an interna-

⁹⁰ *Rocznik kapituły krakowskiej (The Cracow Chapter Yearbook)* (henceforward: *RKKrak.*), in: MPH, s.n., vol. V, ed. Z. Kozłowska-Budkowa, Warszawa 1978, p. 85.

⁹¹ *Joanni de Czarnkow*, cap. 30, p. 674; cap. 31, p. 673.

⁹² According to W. Sieradzian the records of previous trials did not specify the age in years (*op. cit.*, pp. 30, 67). According to H. Chłopocka the only edition of the 1422–23 trial records leaves much to be desired (*Dotychczasowe edycje „Lites ac res gestae” w świetle krytyki [Previous Editions of „Lites ac res gestae” in the Light of Criticism]*, “*Studia Źródłoznawcze*”, vol. 10, 1965, pp. 109–110). However, judging by the author's remarks, the defects of Dziailyński's edition are of no consequence to the subject under my analysis.

⁹³ *Kodeks dyplomatyczny Wielkopolski (The Diplomatic Code of Great Poland)*, vol. VIII (henceforward: *KDW VIII*), ed. A. Gąsiorowski, T. Jasiński, Poznań 1989, N° 947–948–949 — 1422, pp. 232–238.

⁹⁴ *Lites-1422/23*, p. 246.

⁹⁵ *MVPrand.*, p. 445 (miracle N° 1, 1454), *KJdł.*, p. 221 (1455); *Acta iudicii ecclesiastici Wielunensis* (henceforward: *AIEWiel.*), in: *ACNIE*, vol. II, Kraków 1902, pp. 390, 393 (1459).

tional border dispute, records of the sessions of ecclesiastical chapters and lawcourts, registers of Cracow bishops (especially from the so-called *Katalog Jana Długosza* (*Jan Długosz's Catalogue*), bishop Prandota' list of miracles, descriptions of inspections of the Gniezno archbishops' estates in the Łowicz region, as well as some heraldic legends (Bartosz Paprocki's *Gniazdo cnoty* [*The Nest of Virtue*]).

If we should classify this material by taking into account the age-defining conventions, their precision and credibility, we can divide these data into three groups: a. precise data, exact to one year, hence credible; b. round numbers exact to ± 10 years; and c. fantastic information on the number of the years of life, although concerning real persons; I will accept 100 years as the criterion of the fictitiousness of the given age, which I am going to explain later on.

The most precise data make up the smallest group. Precision amounted to one year, sometimes even a few months. The numbers mentioned were: 64⁹⁶, 66 (2 \times)⁹⁷, 72⁹⁸, 75⁹⁹, 76¹⁰⁰, 78¹⁰¹ and 82 years (2 \times)¹⁰². They concerned exclusively the age of high ecclesiastical dignitaries, mostly at the moment of their death. The record concerning archbishop Mikołaj Trąba, who was 64 while being still politically active, was an exception. Regardless of the differences in the cited age of the bishop of Cracow, Jan Konarski, at the moment of his death, (78 and 82 years), there can be no doubt that such a precise definition of the length of life of ecclesiastical dignitaries was possible only due to written tradition.

Definitely the most numerous group of data on age is marked by a tendency to round the numbers up. These data concerned

⁹⁶ Mikołaj Trąba, *Lites-1422/23*, p. 176.

⁹⁷ Zbigniew Oleśnicki, see *KJDł.*, pp. 221–222; *Redakcja wiślicka* (*Wiślica Edition*), in: *KBK Krak.*, p. 289.

⁹⁸ Jakub of Szamotuły, Curate of the Poznań Cathedral and Canon of Our Lady's Collegiate Church, see *Acta iudicii ecclesiastici Poznaniensis* (henceforward: *AIE-Poz.*), in: *ACNIE*, vol. II, rec. 1661–1511, p. 764.

⁹⁹ Jan Łaski, see *Acta iudicii ecclesiastici Gnesnesis* (henceforward: *AIE-Gnez.*), in: *ACNIE*, vol. II, rec. 811–1531, p. 388.

¹⁰⁰ Piotr Tomicki (according to Stanisław Hozjusz), see *KJDł.*, p. 277.

¹⁰¹ Jan Konarski (according to an anonymous author; J. Szymański, *KB-Krak.*, p. 131), see *KJDł.*, p. 249.

¹⁰² a. Andrzej of Bnin, see *ACPoz.*, rec. 665–1479, p. 125; b. Jan Konarski (according to Stanisław Hozjusz), see *KJDł.*, p. 259.

the length of life of persons from the basic strata of the lay part of Polish society: peasants¹⁰³, gentry¹⁰⁴ and magnates¹⁰⁵, as well as burghers¹⁰⁶ including: councillors¹⁰⁷, teachers¹⁰⁸, craftsmen¹⁰⁹, and separate trades — sailors¹¹⁰ and miners¹¹¹. The age of the representatives of various levels of the church (diocesan) hierarchy — from the lower clergy¹¹² up to its strict élite¹¹³ — was generally also cited in round numbers. All the amounts were multiples of “10”: 60 (36×)¹¹⁴, 70 (19×)¹¹⁵, 80 (7×)¹¹⁶ and 90 years (4×)¹¹⁷. The imperfection of the cited numbers was often mentioned, hence they were frequently provided with qualifications like: *prope*¹¹⁸, *citra*¹¹⁹, *aut citra*¹²⁰, *vel citra*¹²¹, *et amplius*¹²²,

¹⁰³ See e.g. *KDW VIII*, N° 949–1422, pp. 233, 236; *AIEPoz.*, rec. 1357–1472, p. 606.

¹⁰⁴ See e.g. *Lites–1422/23*, p. 171; *AIEPloc.*, rec. 209–1502, p. 87.

¹⁰⁵ See e.g. *Lites–1422/23*, p. 307; *AIEPoz.*, rec. 1816–1529, p. 856.

¹⁰⁶ See e.g. *KDW VIII*, N° 948–1422, pp. 233, 236; *AIEPoz.*, rec. 1386–1475, p. 623.

¹⁰⁷ See e.g. *Lites–1422/23*, p. 149; *AIEWiel.*, rec. 815–1459, p. 393.

¹⁰⁸ *MVPrand.*, p. 498 (1464, witness N° 55).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 459 (1454, witness N° 15).

¹¹⁰ See *Acta iudicii ecclesiastici Gedanensis* (henceforward: *AIEGed.*), in: *ACNIE*, vol. III, part 1, rec. 903–1496, p. 375.

¹¹¹ *MVPrand.*, p. 499 (1465, witness N° 56).

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 445, (1454, witness N° 1).

¹¹³ See *Lites–1422/23*, e.g. p. 116.

¹¹⁴ *Lites–1422/23*, pp. 99, 108, 116, 134 (father of witness N° 6), 214, 221, 244, 266; *KDW VIII*, N° 949–1422, p. 236; *MVPrand.*, pp. 445, 448, 450, 459, 466, 468, 474, 475, 484, 489, 498, 499 (witnesses N° 1, 3, 5, 15, 20, 22, 30, 31, 39, 42, 47, 55, 56); *KJDł.*, p. 237; *AIEWiel.*, rec. 814–1459, p. 390; *AIEPoz.*, rec. 1386–1475, p. 623; rec. 1656–1511, p. 757; rec. 1664–1511, p. 767; rec. 1661–1511, p. 771; rec. 1816–1529, p. 856; *AIEGed.*, rec. 903–1496, p. 375; *AIEPloc.*, rec. 178–1499, p. 69; rec. 187–1500, p. 75; rec. 416–1519, p. 198 (third witness); rec. 417–1519, p. 199; rec. 425–1520, p. 202; *ZDmPt. II*, N° 489–1545, p. 290.

¹¹⁵ *Lites–1422/23*, pp. 149, 162, 199, 207, 221, 222 (father of witness N° 19), 307; *KDW VIII*, N° 948–1422, p. 236 (2ö); N° 949–1422, p. 237 (2ö); *MVPrand.*, p. 482 (witness N° 39); *AIEWiel.*, rec. 815–1459, p. 393; *AIEPoz.*, rec. 1357–1472, p. 606, rec. 1665–1511, p. 770; rec. 1780–1524, p. 839; *AIEPloc.*, rec. 187–1500, p. 74 (2ö); rec. 416–1519, p. 198.

¹¹⁶ *Lites–1422/23*, p. 134 (witness N° 6 and his uncle), 173; *KDW VIII*, N° 947–1422, p. 234; *AIEPoz.*, rec. 1362–1472, p. 608; *Ibid.*, p. 609; *Visitaciones bonorum archiepiscopatus necnon capituli gnesnensis saeculi XVI* (henceforward: *Vis.*), ed. B. Ulanowski, Kraków 1920, p. 110, note 7.

¹¹⁷ *Lites–1422/23*, p. 171; *KDW VIII*, N° 948–1422, p. 234; *AIEWiel.*, rec. 815–1459, p. 393; *AIEPloc.*, rec. 209–1502, p. 87.

¹¹⁸ *AIEPoz.*, rec. 1665–1511, p. 770.

¹¹⁹ *KJDł.*, p. 237.

¹²⁰ *AIEPloc.*, rec. 209–1502, p. 87.

*ultra*¹²³, *et ultra*¹²⁴, *vel circa*¹²⁵, *prope vel circa*¹²⁶, *citra vel ultra*¹²⁷, or *circiter vel ultra*¹²⁸. Therefore the researcher, on his part, is not in a better position to assess the reliability of these data, although they do not go beyond the bounds of verisimilitude. Their approximate character seems to testify to the lack of written evidence and to relying on other proofs in defining the interrogated and described persons. Thus a question arises as to the sources of the above information and methods of calculating the years of one's life. It cannot be ruled out in advance that the persons interrogated told their approximate age themselves. Even illiterate people in primitive communities could sometimes cope with finding a relatively exact measure of the years of their lives¹²⁹. In Poland (Great Poland) of the period under examination the ability to calculate one's age with precision up to one year can be proved by the (relatively late) example of using the so-called "calendar tally"¹³⁰. Nevertheless, it seems that this way of measuring a longer period of time was not used in the previously mentioned cases. This is shown by the contrast between the precision of the statements by a peasant from Great Poland, and round numbers in the estimates of the age of numerous witnesses. Thus these estimates must have been made on a different basis.

This question can be solved if we analyse the witnesses' testimonies to miracles which were supposed to take place at the grave of the bishop of Cracow, Prandota (the book published in

¹²¹ *Lites-1422/23*, p. 116.

¹²² *MVPrand.*, p. 499 (witness N° 56).

¹²³ *AIEPoz.*, rec. 1357-1472, p. 606.

¹²⁴ *Lites-1422/23*, p. 99.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹²⁶ *MVPrand.*, p. 475 (witness N° 31).

¹²⁷ *Vis.*, p. 110, note 7.

¹²⁸ *ZDmPł II*, N° 489-1545, p. 290.

¹²⁹ E.g. in some tribes of West Africa and both Americas each year a knot was made, a stone put aside or a notch made on a stick; see S. Ciszewski, *Pierwotne sposoby liczenia i prowadzenia rachunkowości (Primitive Ways of Counting and Accountancy)*, in: *Prace etnologiczne*, Warszawa 1930, p. 108; M. P. Nilsson, *Primitive Time-Reckoning. A Study in the Origins and First Development of the Art of Counting Time Among the Primitive and Early Culture Peoples*, Lund 1920, pp. 93, 326.

¹³⁰ *AIEPoz.*, rec. 1780-1524, p. 839. See on this subject G. Myśliwski, *Kij kalendarzowy z Wielkopolski. Przyczynek do dziejów chronometrii ludowej w XV-XVI w. (The Calendar Tally from Great Poland. A Contribution to the History of Folk Chronometry in the 15th-16th cc.)*, in: *Historia i archeologia. Księga pamiątkowa dla prof. J. Tyszkiewiczza* (in the press).

the middle of the 15th c.)¹³¹. Short presentations of ten miraculously healed old men (sexagenarians, according to the book) include the characteristic expression *ut prima facie apparebat*¹³². On the other hand, the testimony of the only septagenarian includes a synonymous formula *ut apparebat*¹³³. The arrangement of the subject-matter leaves no doubt that the more extended expression (“as he seemed at first glance”) concerns the age of the given person: *etatis sexaginta citra vel ultra annorum, ut prima facie apparebat*¹³⁴; *etatis sue LXta annorum vel ultra ut prima facie apparebat*¹³⁵; *etatis, ut prima facie apparebat, LXta citra vel ultra annorum*¹³⁶. Apart from the West-European analogies described by G. Minois, the above interpretation is additionally corroborated by the only example of testimony where the witness defined his age himself. This was Marcin Zdunek, *montanus, unus de senioribus de Bochnya, etatis, ut prima facie apparebat et etiam dicebat* (underlined by G. M.), *LXta annorum et amplius*¹³⁷. Even in this case, however, those who wrote the text down did not fail to express their own estimate of the age of the interrogated person. So it seems obvious that the above remarks also explain the origin of many data of that type concerning other witnesses described in this work as well as in other sources. This is confirmed by a later example from Mazovia, where information on a certain gentleman’s advanced age (90 years) was also provided with the complement *ut apparebat*¹³⁸. Thus in the case of round numbers (multiples of “10”), the impression made on person A was frequently the basis for defining the age of person B. On the other hand, the example of the miner from the vicinity of Cracow tells us that sometimes the persons interested could have something to say on this subject.

¹³¹ About this grave see the findings of W. Kętrzyński (MPH, vol. 4, p. 439) as well as remarks by J. Tyszkiewicz (*Problematyka*, p. 153).

¹³² *MVPrand.*, pp. 445, 447, 450, 466, 474, 475, 482, 484, 498 (witnesses N° 1, 3, 5, 20, 22, 30, 31, 39, 42, 55).

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 499 (witness N° 56).

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 445 (witness N° 1).

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 466 (witness N° 20).

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 498 (witness N° 55).

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 499 (witness N° 56).

¹³⁸ *AIEPloc.*, rec. 209–1502, p. 87; see also the above-mentioned record on young age by a parish priest from Great Poland, where the phrase *ut apparuit* referred to the age of a fifty year old man (*annorum ut apparuit L citra vel ultra, AIE-Poz.*, rec. 1780–1524, p. 839).

Therefore, in the case where there is no mention of the source of information on the defendant's or witness's age, we should assume hypothetically that both sides established the approximate number of years of somebody's life. We may suppose that ocular impressions of the judges were confronted with the self-appraisal of their own longevity expressed by the interested persons themselves.

A separate group consists of examples of completely incredible, or, at best, very doubtful estimates of the age of otherwise real persons. In spite of appearances, the chronological limit of probability is not obvious. Even in the case of the previous group, we cannot be absolutely sure whether, and which data are true (e.g. 90 or even 60 years — *kopa lat*)¹³⁹, although, judging by J. Delumeau's findings for 12th c. France, Polish data should not have diverged too much from reality. We decided to accept 100 years as the criterion for selecting fantastic data, although, even in medieval demographic realities, such age did not go beyond the bounds of probability (*vide*: Jarosław Bogoria of Skotniki). However, even though the advanced age of this archbishop is not called into question, yet other mentions of supposed centenarians seem to be merely an expressive convention. In fact, history knows many examples of old men from various epochs who were generally acknowledged as centenarians, although nobody, including themselves, knew their date of birth¹⁴⁰. "A hundred years" was simply synonymous with longevity. The term *centenarii* appears in this sense in foreign sources concerning Poland and Polish old men — in the synodal statutes of legate Jacob of Leodium (1248)¹⁴¹ and in Pope Innocent IV's delegation bull for Jacob of Velletri (1252), who was to prepare

¹³⁹ G. Myśliwski, *Between Memory*, pp. 20–21.

¹⁴⁰ See W. Kula, *Problemy i metody historii gospodarczej (Problems and Methods of Economic History)*, Warszawa 1963, p. 452; B. Baranowski, *Życie codzienne wsi między Wartą a Pilicą w XIX wieku (Everyday Life in 19th c. Countryside Between the Warta and Pilica Rivers)*, Warszawa 1969, pp. 150–151.

¹⁴¹ While criticizing the weak reception of Christianity in Polish lands among aged believers, Jacob stated: *Vidimus enim in vestris dyocesibus aliquos centenarios homines, qui nesciebant omnino docere, quid credebant. Jacobi Archidiaconi Leodiensis, Legati Apostolici Constitutiones in concilio Wratislaviensi anno 1248 die decima mensis Octobris editae*, in: *Starodawne prawa polskiego pomniki (henceforward SPPP)*, ed. A. Z. Hejceł, vol. 1, Warszawa 1856, p. 357; see also M. Chamaćówna, *Szkołnictwo wiejskie do czasów Komisji Edukacji Narodowej (The Rural School System Until the Commission of National Education)*, in: *Historia chłopów polskich*, vol. 1, ed. S. Inglot, Warszawa 1970, p. 480.

materials for bishop Stanislaus's canonization¹⁴². In both cases "centenarian" signifies simply "very old" or even simply "old" (as in the statutes of 1248). In a similar way, in our opinion, should be treated other mentions of "centenarians" or a little older men — the above-mentioned Gedka, informants of witnesses in the trial of 1422: a centenarian gentleman¹⁴³, a centenarian *scultetus*¹⁴⁴ or numerous "almost" centenarians from the Chełmno land¹⁴⁵, as well as a little older story-teller who remembered the history of the Junosza family and their coat-of-arms, "who said he was a hundred and five or six years old, and bore a gentlemanly name of Brykcy Trzepatowski (...)"¹⁴⁶. The fantastic character of data needs no proof in the case of supposedly even older persons, and, a strange thing, more precisely described than frequently anonymous centenarians. Mentions of their even older countrymen appear exclusively in the same records of the trial of 1422. To this group belong three old men: a hundred and thirty year old gentleman named Parzysz and a hundred and fifty year old Bartosz — both informants of the Poznań burgher Jerzy Merkel¹⁴⁷, as well as a hundred and forty year old grandfather of Clement, an altarist from Poznań¹⁴⁸.

From the same source comes a well-known record about two long-lived old men from Great Poland — a burgher from Poznań Mikołaj Szatkowski¹⁴⁹ and his father. Szatkowski in the year of

¹⁴² The men in question were probably Pietrek and Gromadza, the sextons from St. Michael's Church on the Skalka in Cracow, (witnesses to the appearance of bishop Stanislaus), who were described precisely as *illos duos centenarios* ("Analecta Cracoviensia", vol. 11, Kraków 1979, p. 42).

¹⁴³ Mikołaj Trąba, Archbishop of Gniezno and primate *hoc scit quia sic audivit dici et diffamari (...) a multis et maxime a quodam grandevo nobili etatis centum annorum vel circa (...)*. (*Lites-1422/23*, p. 184, art. 70).

¹⁴⁴ Jan of Kretków, Castellan of Rypin referred to information from a *quodam suo sculteto qui habuit centum annos* (*ibid.*, p. 222, art. 2).

¹⁴⁵ Jakub, Voivode of Sieradz *dixit se audivisse a quampluribus incolis illius terre culmensis antiquis fere centenariis* (*ibid.*, p. 246, art. 12).

¹⁴⁶ B. Paprocki, *Gniazdo cnoty* (*The Nest of Virtue*). Kraków 1578, p. 1098. I quote from: M. Kazaniczuk, *Staropolskie legendy herbowe* (*Old-Polish Heraldic Legends*), Wrocław 1990, p. 146.

¹⁴⁷ *Hoc audivit dici a patre suo et etiam a quodam Bartoschio etatis CL annorum vel circa et ab alio nobili dicto Parzisch etatis CXXX annorum* (*Lites-1422/23*, p. 141, art. 28).

¹⁴⁸ *Et hoc scit ex eo maxime quia audivit ab avo suo qui fuit antiquissimus etatis CXL annorum* (*ibid.*, p. 134, art. 2).

¹⁴⁹ Mikołaj Szatkowski was mentioned by previous researchers into the lawsuits between Poland and the Teutonic Order H. Chłopocka, *Tradycja o Pomorzu*

the lawsuit was supposed to be as old as 150 (*etatis CL annorum*). He “confirmed” his fantastic age by to us (underlined by G. M.) an equally incredible retrospection of the short reign of Przemysław II and Ladislaus the Short’s coming to power in Poland¹⁵⁰. Then Szatkowski treated the judges to a tale about taking part in a generally mentioned Polish–Teutonic war in this ruler’s reign (the event in question could be the defence of Świecie in 1309). This fantasizing burgher was supposed to have fought against the Order with an arbalest in hand (*ballistarius*) by the side of his father¹⁵¹. The latter was supposed to have lived up to the record-breaking age of almost 200 years (*prope ducentos annos*) and to have seen with his very eyes Boleslaus the Brave — the alleged conqueror of Pomerania¹⁵². This case of an extraordinary witness deserves a special treatment, since in contrast to other fantastically long-lived old men, he defined his unbelievable age himself. Although conscious fantasizing aimed at supporting the Polish cause in the lawsuit cannot be ruled out, it seems that Szatkowski’s incredible stories resulted from other, objective premisses. I suppose that his memory was a mixture of knowledge based on experience (and recounted in other fragments of his testimony), as well as overheard and invented stories. Szatkowski certainly had problems with their co-ordination and selection. He was not able to separate the facts known from hearsay from ones he really experienced, and his exuberant imagination and probably very emotional psychical structure made a mix of both groups of information. We should add to it the data that were presented to

Gdańskim w zeznaniach świadków na procesach polsko-krzyżackich w XIV i XV wieku (Tradition in Gdańsk Pomerania in Witnesses’ Testimonies in 14th–15th c. Lawsuits Between Poland and the Teutonic Order), “Roczniki Historyczne”, vol. 25, 1959, pp. 99, 123–124, 127–128, and W. Sieradzan (*op. cit.*, pp. 30, 67, 202), as well as B. G e r e m e k (*Temporal Imagination*, pp. 57–58). All the authors only affirmed the fantastic character of Szatkowski’s reports and summarized some of his expositions.

¹⁵⁰ (...) *suo iuramento respondit se scire (...) vel non recordatur ipse testis quia regnante illo Premislio ipse testis non erat presens in regno sed erat in terris Russie et Podolie in confinibus Turcorum hoc tamen scit quod in suo redditu inveniit quondam Wladislaum dictum Lokethek assumptum in regem Polonie (Lites-1422/23, p. 168, art. 28).*

¹⁵¹ (...) *ob hanc causam fuit mota guerra per predictum Wladislaum contra magistrum et fratres Prussie et ipsem testis cum patre suo fuit presens in bello pro balistario (ibid., p. 169, art. 29).*

¹⁵² *Et hoc scit pro tanto quod habuit a patre suo quem dixit vixisse prope ducentos annos quod ipse vidit primum regem Polonie Boleslaum Chabri vocatum (...) et dicebat ei quod ille Boleslaus fuit primus qui reduxit omnes ducatus ad obedientiam Regni Polonie (...) (ibid., p. 167, art. 2).*

him, contained in the articles of the lawsuit. Thus Szatkowski might really take part in some, much later, war against the Order, or stay *in confinibus Turcorum*. However, he was completely unable to connect the series of his own experiences with the sequence of historic events. His fantastic chronology was to bring them together and make his testimony credible. Nor can it be ruled out that Szatkowski overcoloured some segments of his narration. The latter testifies to his complete inability to count. An allegedly two hundred year old father of the burgher from Poznań was supposed to have seen Boleslaus the Brave or take part in wars against the Teutonic Knights in Ladislaus the Short's time (i. e. beginning with 1309). In such a case his father should have lived almost throughout three and not two centuries!

It should be noted that even the intellectuals treated seriously the fabulous relations about old men who almost reached the age of Methuselah. An impressive example of that is the story by Jan of Dobra, a lecturer on medicine at Cracow Academy in the first half of the 15th c. He wrote down second-hand a story about some centuries-aged (*sic!*) newcomer from the Orient: "Sir Henry, a Bohemian astronomer, told me of some Armenian who lived in Bavaria up to 400 years"¹⁵³. What is striking, the Cracow physician was much more amazed at the mysterious treatment that ensured such a long life to this old man than at his fantastic age.

As can be seen, these examples of defining the age of "centenarians" and even older people are marked not only by the fantastic number of years cited, but also by a tendency to use round numbers (multiples of "10"). Very old men were supposed to occur in all the strata of Polish society. All these numbers are usually known from second hand, from oral tradition. The above-mentioned Szatkowski was an exception, and certainly he gave his improbable age of 150 himself. Judging by the data from the

¹⁵³ *Dominus Henricus astronom Boemus dixit michi de quodam Armeno, qui morabatur in Bauoria, qui vixit 400 annorum*. I quote from: M. Kowalczyk, *Przyczynki do biografii Henryka Czecha i Marcina Króla z Żurawicy* (*Contributions to the Biographies of Henryk Czech and Marcin Król of Żurawica*), "Biuletyn Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej", vol. 21, 1971, fasc. 1-2, p. 88. On Jan of Dobra see L. Hajdukiewicz, *Jan z Dobry, Polski Słownik Biograficzny* (*Jan of Dobra, Polish Biographical Dictionary*) (henceforward: PSB), vol. 10, Wrocław 1962, pp. 449-450. Old age was the subject of interest of late-medieval Polish physicians, as can be seen from e.g. the Cracow medical calendar of 1474 (J. Banaszkiewicz, *Poznanie naukowe i wiedza o świecie* [*Scientific Cognition and Knowledge of the World*], in: *Kult. XIV-XV w.*, p. 396).

second group, it seems improbable that an educated body of judges could have made such an estimate of age on the basis of someone's appearance. The fantastic data about a hundred and several score year old men were given by witnesses, and not by the judges. The definitions of the length of life of other litigants show that they told their age themselves, the younger frequently with precision up to one year.

Despite the fantastic character of the numbers cited they should not be ignored, we should rather make an inquiry into the origin of this kind of information. We should agree with W. Kula's view that at the source of these supratemporal ideas of extraordinarily old age lay subconscious desires and deep cultural conditionings: "These myths express both the age-long dreams of humanity about overcoming, or at least putting off the spectre of death as far as possible, and the apology of a definite «style» and value of life"¹⁵⁴. In my opinion, however, there were other reasons for the above-discussed mentions of the record-breaking longevity of people in the 13th–16th cc. All the above-mentioned old men appear as carriers of valuable information on the distant past, whether during the trial or in private conversations. The testimonies of long-lived witnesses were to prove the justness of some historico-political claims (the 1422–23 lawsuit, the dispute over the boundary with the New Margraviate in 1422), or to provide valuable information on the past of the country (Gedko on St. Stanislaus and the deeds of Polish knights) or a family (Brykcy Trzepatowski). Those who generally passed verdicts on the old age of these persons were intent on authenticating their accounts. Since in traditional societies the memory of old people was treated with great respect, their record-breaking old age was emphasized for practical reasons. The lack of precise information, recorded in writing, on the dates of their births, made verification impossible. The cases of fantastic estimates of the length of one's own life were also due to the inability to count the lapse of long periods of time — the old men themselves adjusted their conviction of the many years of their lives to the current patterns of longevity (unless they wanted to enhance their self-importance by emphasizing their old age). It is a striking thing that nobody tried to question these data, which, it seems,

¹⁵⁴ W. Kula, *op. cit.*, p. 452.

did not appear to be incredible to medieval and early modern men. I think I am right in my view that the unshakeable *auctoritas* of the *Bible*, which contained records of the exceptionally old age of the patriarchs, brushed the doubts of educated people aside¹⁵⁵.

V. *Qualitative old age in Poland*

In Polish writings the definitions of old age in years appeared rarely and late, in contrast to an early appearance of mentions about aged people. We find them as early as the works of Gallus Anonymus and Master Vincent¹⁵⁶. Moreover, in Polish lands people were much more frequently classified as aged with the help of subjective terms, expressions and descriptions, than with the use of allegedly objective criterion of years of life. These terms, expressions and descriptive definitions of old age can be divided into two basic groups: those that inform directly of the advanced age of one or a few persons, and those that conceal this kind of information, which can be obtained only by means of deduction, interpretation of the context, as well as comparison with similar examples. On the other hand within the framework of both groups we list terms and expressions concerning old age according to the grammatico-semantic criterion. In Polish writings under our analysis we have found the following ways of classifying selected inhabitants of Polish lands as long-lived:

A. Direct terms and expressions

- the adjective *antiquus* in the function of a noun¹⁵⁷;
- the adjective *antiquus* complemented by general nouns: *antiquis personis*¹⁵⁸, *antiquos homines*¹⁵⁹, *antiquis incolis*¹⁶⁰;

¹⁵⁵ So in J. Banaszkiewicz, *Poznanie*, p. 381.

¹⁵⁶ *Galli Anonymi Cronicae et gesta ducum sive principum polonorum* (henceforward: *Galli*), ed. K. Maleczyński, MPH, s.n., vol II, Kraków 1952...., lib. I, cap. 3, p. 12; cap. 4, p. 14; lib. II, cap. 16, pp. 82, 83; cap. 21, p. 88; cap. 38, p. 108; cap. 42, p. 112; cap. 43, p. 113; *Magistri Vincenti*, lib. I, cap. 1, p. 6; cap. 2, p. 7, cap. 5, p. 10; lib. III, cap. 30, p. 128; lib. IV, cap. 10, p. 150; cap. 23, p. 181, 182; cap. 25, pp. 187, 188.

¹⁵⁷ *Nowy kodeks dyplomatyczny Mazowsza (The New Diplomatic Code of Mazovia)*, part II (1248–1355), (henceforward: *NKDM-II*), ed. I. Sułkowska-Kuraś, S. Kuraś, Wrocław 1989, N° 22–1256, p. 23; *Lites-1422/23*, p. 102 (art. 13).

¹⁵⁸ *Iura Mazoviae Terrestria* (henceforward: *IMT*), vol. I, ed. J. Sawicki, Warszawa 1972, N° 16–1358, p. 20.

¹⁵⁹ *KZCz*, rec. 137–1409, p. 22.

¹⁶⁰ *Lites-1422/23*, p. 153 (art. 24).

- the adjective *antiquus/stary* complemented by the first name, sometimes even surname: e.g. *Katherina antiqua*¹⁶¹, *Petrus Craws antiquus*¹⁶²; Pol.: *Kuczyensky stary*¹⁶³.
- the adjective *antiquus* complemented by information about sex: *viros antiquos*¹⁶⁴;
- the adjective *antiquus* complemented by information on the position in one's family: *suis progenitoribus antiquis*¹⁶⁵, *antiquis maioribus suis*¹⁶⁶, *suis antiquis senioribus*¹⁶⁷, *avo suo multum antiquo*¹⁶⁸, *a patre suo antiquo*¹⁶⁹, *antiqua matre*¹⁷⁰, Pol.: *stara matka* (old mother)¹⁷¹, *ojciec stary* (old father)¹⁷²;
- the adjective *antiquus* complemented by information on the place of residence: *multis antiquis Regni Polonie*¹⁷³, *audivit sic dici*

¹⁶¹ *Breslauer Urkundenbuch* (henceforward: *BUB* I), vol. 1, ed. G. Korn, Breslau 1870, N° 166–1340, p. 150; *Księgi gromadzkie wsi Krościenko 1408–1535* (*The Krościenko Village Court Books 1408–1535*) (henceforward: *KGKrośc.*), in: *SPPP*, vol. XI, Kraków 1921, rec. 1264–1426, p. 164; see also *Die ältesten grosspolnischen Grodbücher* (henceforward: *GG*), vol. I, ed. J. von Lekszycki, Leipzig 1887, rec. 1939–1394, p. 213; *Najdawniejsze księgi sądowe krakowskie (1374–1390)* (*Cracow's Earliest Court Books [1374–1390]*), (henceforward: *KSKrak.–Ulan.*), in: ed. B. Ulanowski, *SPPP*, vol. VIII, Kraków 1884, register group N° 81, rec. 10–1388, p. 242; *Księga ziemska kaliska 1400–1409* (*The Kalisz Country Court Book 1400–1409*) (henceforward: *KZKal.*), ed. T. Jurek, Poznań 1991, rec. 3–1400, p. 1; *Najstarsza księga sądowa wsi Trześniowa 1419–1609* (*The Oldest Court Book of Trześniów Village 1419–1609*) (henceforward: *NKSTrześn.*), ed. H. Polackówna, Lwów 1923, rec. 310–1478, p. 99; *Acta iudicii ecclesiastici Wladislaviensis*, in: *ACNIE*, vol. III, part 1, rec. 521–1480, p. 239.

¹⁶² *KGKrośc.*, rec. 1126–1420, p. 154; see also e.g. *BUB* I, N° 76–1306, p. 75.

¹⁶³ *Bolemowo oppidum. Possessores ipsorum mansorum*, ed. H. Wajs, "Regiony" 1994, N° 3 (74), pp. 126, 129 (1510); *Księga gromadzka Maszkienice 1482–1602* (*The Court Book of Maszkienice Village 1482–1602*) (henceforward: *KGMaszk.*), in: *SPPP*, vol. XI, rec. 693–1523, p. 97; *NKSTrześn.*, rec. 1158–1563, p. 324.

¹⁶⁴ *Zbiór dokumentów małopolskich* (*A Collection of Documents from Little Poland*) (henceforward: *ZDMałop.*), vol. III, ed. S. Kuraś, I. Sulkowska–Kuraś, Wrocław 1969, N° 611–1442, p. 29.

¹⁶⁵ *Lites–1422/23*, p. 196 (art. 70).

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 221 (art. 1).

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 154 (art. 31).

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 145 (art. 2).

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 145 (art. 70).

¹⁷⁰ *Księga sądowa poddanych klasztoru benedyktynek w Lubiniu 1432–1542* (*The Court Book of the Subjects of the Benedictine Nun Convent in Lubiń 1432–1542*), *SPPP*, vol. XI, rec. 4474–1477, p. 694.

¹⁷¹ *Ortyłe magdeburskie* (*Magdeburg Verdicts*) (MS of 1480), I quote from: *SStarop.*, vol. 8, p. 425.

¹⁷² *Biblia królowej Zofii* (*Queen Sophia's Bible*) (*Genesis XIX, 31*, MS of 1455), I quote from: *SStarop.*, vol. 8, *ibid.*

¹⁷³ *Lites–1422/23*, p. 231 (art. 70).

*ab antiquis in Poznania et in Calis maxime*¹⁷⁴, *multis antiquis habitantibus circa ecclesias cathedrales Gnezdensem et Poznaniensem ac extra regnum in Wratislavia sanctum Vincencium in monasterio*¹⁷⁵;

— the adjective *antiquus* complemented by information on the function or social status: *antiquus rusticus ducis*¹⁷⁶, *kmethones antiqui*¹⁷⁷, *testes antiqui*¹⁷⁸, *magni viri antiqui*¹⁷⁹, *multis antiquis nobilibus*¹⁸⁰, *prelatis antiquis*¹⁸¹, *antiquis vitricis*¹⁸², *fratres antiqui*¹⁸³, *antiquo capelano*¹⁸⁴; Pol.: *stary wójt* (old head-man)¹⁸⁵, *starzy służdy* (old servants)¹⁸⁶;

— the adjective *antiquus* complemented by information on education: *Stanislaum magistrum antiquum*¹⁸⁷;

— the adjective *antiquus* complemented by combined information: *antiquis nobilibus regni*¹⁸⁸, *plebano multum antiquo homine ibidem de Brodnicza*¹⁸⁹, *Cmiato de Granschewo homine antiquo*¹⁹⁰, *suis progenitoribus et maioribus regni antiquis*¹⁹¹, *antiqua*

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136 (art. 71).

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 135 (art. 29).

¹⁷⁶ *Liber foundationis claustris Sancte Marie Virginis in Henrichow*. (henceforward: *LHen.*), ed. R. Grodecki, Poznań — Wrocław 1949, lib. I, cap. 2, p. 254.

¹⁷⁷ *Wyciągi z najstarszych ksiąg sądowych dawnej ziemi krakowskiej 1394–1506* (Extracts from the Earliest Court Books of the Old Cracow District 1394–1506), ed. A. Z. Helcel, in: *SPPP*, vol. II, Kraków 1870, rec. 4482–1497, p. 922.

¹⁷⁸ *Vis.*, p. 339.

¹⁷⁹ *Lites–1422/23*, p. 177 (art. 2).

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 178 (art. 10).

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 136 (art. 70).

¹⁸² *Acta ecclesiae collegiatae Varsoviensis*, in: "Archiwum Komisji Prawniczej" (henceforward: *AKP*), vol. VI, ed. B. Ulanowski, Kraków 1926, N° 111–1530, p. 31.

¹⁸³ In the sense "monks" (from testimonies in the lawsuit between Poland and the Teutonic Order in 1339), see M. Łodyński, *Regnum Poloniae w opinii publicznej XIV w. (Regnum Poloniae in 14th c. Public Opinion)*, "Kwartalnik Historyczny", vol. 28, 1914, p. 47.

¹⁸⁴ *KSKrak. –Ulan.*, rec. 4783–1388, p. 267.

¹⁸⁵ *NKStrzešn.*, rec. 565–1514, p. 165.

¹⁸⁶ *Lustracje województwa rawskiego 1564, 1570* (Inspections of the Rawa District 1564, 1570), ed. Z. Kędzierska, Warszawa 1959, p. 6.

¹⁸⁷ *Księgi sądowe łęczyckie od 1385 do 1418* (The Łęczyca Court Books from 1385 to 1418), (Henceforward: *KSŁęcz.*), part 2, "Teki Pawińskiego", vol. 4, ed. A. Pawiński, Warszawa 1897, rec. 4851–1394, p. 571.

¹⁸⁸ *Lites–1422/23*, p. 231 (art. 69).

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 201 (art. 24).

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 202 (art. 41).

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 307 (art. 2).

*domina de Gaudky*¹⁹², *stary człowiek szlachcic polski* (old man Polish nobleman)¹⁹³;

— the adjective *antiquus/stary* in the comparative or the superlative (where there is no doubt that it relates to aged persons), or in the superlative (sometimes with their social status): *valde (...) antiquus*¹⁹⁴, *avo suo multum antiquo*¹⁹⁵, *antiquiores homines*¹⁹⁶, *antiquissimi*¹⁹⁷, *cmethones antiquiores*¹⁹⁸; Pol.: *najstarsi (...) gospodarze*¹⁹⁹ (the oldest farmers);

— the noun *senex*²⁰⁰, *senes*²⁰¹ / Pol.: *starczy*²⁰² (old men);

— the noun *senex* complemented by general nouns: *homo senex*²⁰³, *homines senes*²⁰⁴;

— the noun *senex* complemented by the first name or surname: e.g. *Pachozlaus senex*²⁰⁵;

— the noun *senex* complemented by information on the function or social status: *spirituales nobiles et cives (...) senes*²⁰⁶, *senex advocatus*²⁰⁷;

¹⁹² GG, vol. 1, rec. 20–1386, p. 4.

¹⁹³ B. Paprocki, *op. cit.*, p. 1061, I quote from: M. Kazańczuk, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

¹⁹⁴ *LHen.*, lib. 1, cap. 8, p. 277.

¹⁹⁵ *Lites-1422/23*, p. 150 (art. 2).

¹⁹⁶ *Vis.*, p. 33.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 110, note 7.

¹⁹⁸ *Vis.*, p. 265.

¹⁹⁹ A. Gostomski, *Gospodarstwo (Farming)*, ed. S. Ingłot, Wrocław 1951, pp. 130–131.

²⁰⁰ *BUB I*, N° 16–1251, p. 12; *Redakcja dominikańska (Dominican Edition)* (henceforward: *RDom.*), in: *KBKra.*, p. 101.

²⁰¹ *BUB I*, N° 257–1369, p. 218; *Wybór zapisek sądowych kaliskich 1409–1416 (A Selection of the Kalisz Court Records 1409–1416)*, ed. B. Ulanowski, Kraków 1885, rec. 721–1416, p. 111.

²⁰² *ZDMałop.*, vol. IV, Wrocław 1969, N° 961–1359, p. 114; *Księgi sądowe brzesko-kujawskie 1418–1424 (The Brześć-Kujawy Court Books 1418–1424)*, in: "Teki Pawińskiego", vol. 7, ed. J. K. Kochanowski, Warszawa 1905, rec. 1832–1420, pp. 188–189; Central Archives of Historical Records, Ignacy Kapica–Milewski collection, the Zambrów court books, box 68, pp. 5–6 (1444); *Lubelska księga podkomorska piętnastego wieku (The Lublin Book of 15th c. Boundary Delimitations)*, ed. L. Białkowski, Lublin 1934, p. 13 (1447); *Ekscepta y zwyczajey województwa mazowieckiego (Exceptions and Customs of the Mazovian Voivodeship)* (henceforward: *EMaz.*), in: *Volumina Legum*, vol. 2, ed. J. Ohryzko, Petersburg 1859, par. 42 *O czynieniu granic (On the Delimitation of Boundaries)*, p. 175.

²⁰³ *AIEPloc.*, rec. 178–1499, p. 69.

²⁰⁴ *KSKrak. -Helc.*, rec. 4482–1497, p. 922.

²⁰⁵ *Zbiór spominków i przywilejów mazowieckich (A Collection of Mazovian Documents)*, ed. J. K. Kochanowski, Warszawa 1919, N° 363–1242, p. 416.

²⁰⁶ *KSKrak. -Helc.*, rec. 3558–1454, p. 634.

- the adjective *senilis*²⁰⁸;
- descriptive expressions: *grandis natu*²⁰⁹, *vir grandevus*²¹⁰, *gravibus personis*²¹¹, *homo grandevus*²¹², *natu maiorum*²¹³, *homo antiquis adeo antiquus quod ut dicit ipse testis cum ipse Gotfridus sit mortuus LX annis elapsis ipse tamen vidit in vita ipsius eius scripta de LXX annis*²¹⁴, *natu et etate grandevus*²¹⁵, *etate (...) devexa*²¹⁶, *grandaevi aetate*²¹⁷, *etate provectus*²¹⁸, *satis anno-sa*²¹⁹, *senectute confectus*²²⁰, *senio convectus*²²¹, *aetatis seni defectibus*²²², *in senium proclivus*²²³, *fractus senio*²²⁴; Pol.: *w starych latach*²²⁵ (in old age);
- a noun designating the aged stage of life applied exceptionally to define a group of aged persons: *senecta*²²⁶;
- adjectives in the function of nicknames probably due to advanced age: *Thomas dicitur Staripar*²²⁷;

²⁰⁷ NKSTrześn., rec. 716–1530, p. 211.

²⁰⁸ B. Erzepki, *Przyczynki do średniowiecznego słownictwa polskiego. Głosy polskie wpisane do łacińsko-niemieckiego słownika (Contributions to Medieval Polish Vocabulary. Polish Glosses Inserted in a Latin-German Dictionary)* 101, (pub. of 1490), "Roczniki Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk", vol. 24; I quote from: SStarop., vol. 8, p. 425.

²⁰⁹ *Magistri Vincentii*, lib. I, cap. 2, p. 7.

²¹⁰ *Vita Sanctae Hedvigis (vita maior)*, (henceforward: VSHed.), ed. A. Semkowicz, MPH, vol. IV, Kraków 1884, p. 618.

²¹¹ *Lites-1422/23*, p. 221 (art. 1).

²¹² *KJDł.*, p. 207.

²¹³ *Martini Cromeri Polonia sive de situ, populis, moribus, magistratibus et republica Regni Polonici libri duo*, ed. W. Czermak, Kraków 1901, p. 53.

²¹⁴ *Lites-1422/23*, p. 156 (art. 55).

²¹⁵ *VSStan. ~JDł.*, p. 161.

²¹⁶ *Magistri Vincentii*, lib. III, cap. 30, p. 128.

²¹⁷ *Vita sancti Stanislai Cracoviensis episcopi (vita maior)*, (henceforward: VSSt.), ed. W. Kętrzyński, in: MPH, vol. IV, Kraków 1884, p. 394.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

²¹⁹ *VSHed.*, p. 598.

²²⁰ *KJDł.*, p. 265.

²²¹ E.g. *Herbarz Ignacego Kapicy-Milewskiego (Ignacy Kapica-Milewski's Armo-rial)*, Kraków 1870, p. 50 (1612).

²²² Janusz I the Elder's Privilege of 1425; I quote from: M. Słóń, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

²²³ *VSStan. ~JDł.*, p. 160.

²²⁴ *ACPoz.*, rec. 665–1479, p. 125.

²²⁵ *Rozmyślanie o żywocie Pana Jezusa (Meditation on the Life of Jesus, Our Lord)* (MS of about 1500); I quote from: SStarop., vol. 8, p. 425.

²²⁶ The Czersk court book (extinct), 1446, in: K. Tymieniecki, *op. cit.*, p. 62, note 3.

²²⁷ *NKDM-II*, N° 30–1257, p. 31; see also e.g. *AIEGnez.*, rec. 77–1417, p. 22; *NKSTrześn.*, rec. 562–1514, p. 162; *KGMasz.*, rec. 813–1543, p. 113.

- the adjective *decrepitas*²²⁸;
- combined designations: *nobilibus ipsius regni iam antiquis et senio confectis*²²⁹.

B. Indirect terms and expressions

- the adjective *senior* in the function of a noun (in cases where there is no doubt that aged persons, and not only those of higher social status are concerned)²³⁰; Pol: *starsi*²³¹ (the elderly);
- the adjective *maior* (in situations analogous to *senior*)²³²;
- the adjective *canus*²³³ pointing to the characteristics of appearance identified with symptoms of old age;
- nouns designating the degree of relationship with living, but aged ancestors: *vetula*²³⁴, *vetulus*²³⁵, *awus*²³⁶; Pol.: *baba*²³⁷ (old woman);
- nouns designating a social function which could be fulfilled mainly by aged people: *parochia*²³⁸, *communitas*²³⁹; Pol.: *ossada*²⁴⁰, *pamiętnicy*²⁴¹ (people who remember);
- the noun *coetaneis*²⁴², the sense of which depends on the age of the person who is the point of reference for the person defined by the mentioned term.

²²⁸ VSSt., p. 395.

²²⁹ *Lites-1422/23*, p. 177 (art. 2).

²³⁰ *KSŁęcz.*, part 2, rec. 1945–1410, p. 222; *Lites-1422/23*, p. 239 (art. 29).

²³¹ *Zapiski i roty polskie XV–XVI wieku z ksiąg sądowych ziemi warszawskiej* (Polish 15th–16th c. Records and Oaths from the Warsaw District Court Books), ed. W. Kuraszkiewicz, A. Wolff, Kraków 1950, rec. 1183–1464, p. 96; see also *EMaz.* (par. 41 *O czynieniu granic* [On the Delimitation of Boundaries], p. 175); cf. *Zwód Goryńskiego* (Goryński's Code), in: *IMT*, vol. III, Warszawa 1974 (par. 90 *Consuetudo limitandi, ubi ante granicies non fuerunt*, p. 169).

²³² *Galli*, lib. II, cap. 42, p. 112.

²³³ *ZDmPł II*, N° 489–1545, p. 290.

²³⁴ *AIEPoz.*, rec. 1660–1511, p. 763.

²³⁵ *NKSTRześn.*, rec. 484–1501, p. 142.

²³⁶ *Zapiski sądowe województwa sandomierskiego* (Court Records of the Sandomierz Voivodeship), in: *AKP*, vol. VIII, part 1, ed. F. Piekosiński, Kraków 1907, rec. 476–1409, p. 105.

²³⁷ *KZKal.*, rec. 1862–1406, p. 133.

²³⁸ The Grójec court book (extinct), 1450, in: K. Tymieniecki, *op. cit.*, p. 64, note 1.

²³⁹ *Księga ziemska płońska (1400–1417)* (The Płońsk Court Book [1400–1417]), ed. M. Handelman, Warszawa 1920, rec. 729–1406, p. 52.

²⁴⁰ *KZCz.*, rec. 81–1408, p. 13.

²⁴¹ *Lustracja województwa mazowieckiego 1565* (Inspection of the Mazovian District 1565), part 1, ed. I. Gieysztorowa, A. Żaboklicka, Warszawa 1967, p. 254.

²⁴² *Lites-1422/23*, p. 172 (art. 29). The qualification of the word *coetanei* (peers in years) as "old men" is in this case possible, since we possess the data concerning the person who pronounced this remark. It was Mikołaj of Srebrna Górka, over

There is a large variety of qualitative designations of old age in the relics of Polish writing under analysis. It should be noted, however, that particular terms and expressions appeared with different frequency. The term *antiquus*, and its derivatives were used very frequently, and recorded in various types of sources, but such words as (*satis*) *annosa* or *senilis* appeared only sporadically. More refined expressions appear almost exclusively in ecclesiastical sources — both narrative and judicial. Nevertheless the vocabulary in secular records can by no means be treated as scanty. On the other hand, there is a very distinct disproportion between the rich Latin vocabulary relating to aged people and the Polish lexis. Our native collection is very modest, in fact it boils down to the comparison of the word *stary* (old). Exceptions only prove the rule.

A question then arises, whether these qualitative designations reflect some, then current, concepts of old people and old age in general. The majority of the cited words are general terms, hence it seems impossible to establish the age of the mentioned persons only on this basis. It seems even more difficult to establish the views on old age on the basis of these laconic designations. However, some terms and designations enable us not only to carry out a grammatical classification of this vocabulary, but to draw some deeper conclusions. Let us start with the question of the gradation of old age. In reference to our earlier deliberations on the words *senium* and *decrepitus*, we can see that the period (and the state) of advanced old age, i.e. decrepitude, is distinguished as a separate category also in the vocabulary we have presented. In this context we should draw attention to the gradation of the term *antiquus*. Expressions of the type *valde antiquus* and *multum antiquus* seem to designate not merely "old", but "very old" people, and at the same time to reflect the practice of distinguishing the degrees of old age on a different basis than the number of years of one's life. Also the term *satis annosa* ("relatively aged", or "very old") contains in itself an element of gradation. It should be stressed, however, that expressions of that type appear only in ecclesiastical sources. This confirms our earlier suggestions that reflections on old age and

90 years old (*etatis XC annorum et ultra; ibid.*, p. 171), who drew information on the changing sovereigns of Pomerania *ab omnibus coetaneis suis cum quibus conferebat super ista materia*.

its different stages (not necessarily calculated in years) were only expressed by some clergymen.

Thus what matters is the premisses, on the basis of which given persons were classified as old, although there was no information on their date of birth. The answer is hidden in a few records, among which the most suggestive is the well-known passage on the Silesian peasant Kwiecik (12th–13th c.), a valuable source of information for the Cistercians of Henryków. They characterized him in the following way: "(...) he was very old, hence he knew the history of many years. This rustic at the time when this monastery had already been founded, was already deprived of one hand, while the other had been so injured by a sword that he could not move it at all according to his need. Since he was (...) extremely miserable in (...) body, and as it has been said, very old, Sir Henry, the first abbot of this monastery and his successor, Sir Bodo, had fed this rustic till his death"²⁴³. Equally important information is also contained in a document of 1425, from Little Poland. It recounts that a Cistercian abbot from Koprzywnica sought after aged noblemen who could remember the endowment of the church in Dobrzechów: "we have called together the parishioners of this church, sturdy and honest noblemen (...) who at that time seemed to be older (underlined by G. M.), more significant, and dignified"²⁴⁴. So it is possible that the men in question did not know the dates of their births. Let us finally cite such suggestive terms as *decrepitus* and *canus*. These quotations when set against the qualitative terminology listed above seem to justify the conclusion that in general opinion

²⁴³ (...) erat valde antiquus, unde recordabatur facta multorum annorum. Hic rusticus in diebus illis, cum iam hic claustrum fundatum esset, carvit una manu, alteram habuit gladio ita lesam, ut eam ad sue necessitatis officium nusquam poterat movere. Under quia corpore (...) nimis miserrimus et valde, ut dictum est antiquus, dominus abbas Henricus, primus huius claustrum, et successor eius dominus Bodo paverunt eundem rusticum victualibus usque ad mortem suam. (*LHen.*, lib. I, cap. 8, pp. 277–278; translation by R. Grodecki, *ibid.*, p. 117). The figure of Kwiecik and his role in handing over the knowledge of the past is the subject of P. Grodecki's works, see *op. cit.*, pp. 140–145; *Local Society and Legal Knowledge. A Case Study from the Henryków Region*, in: *Christianitas et Cultura Europae. Księga Jubileuszowa Profesora Jerzego Kłoczowskiego*, vol. 1, Lublin 1998, pp. 545–546, 548–549.

²⁴⁴ (...) convocavimus eiusdem ecclesie parochianos strenuum nobiles et honestos (...) qui tunc videbantur esse seniores, notabiliores et digniores (...). *ZDMałop.*, vol. II, Wrocław 1964, N° 381–1425, pp. 53–54.

an old man was above all a person who looked worn-out with life (presumably a long one, and rich in experience).

This was not, however, the only distinctive mark of old age. Another one is revealed, e.g. by a passage from the minutes of a session of the Gniezno chapter at the beginning of the 16th c. It contains a second-hand report on the request of the archbishop of Gniezno, Andrzej Boryszewski, directed to Pope Julius II for the appointment of his assistant (coadjutor)²⁴⁵. Canon Spytko who gave this evidence justified the Primate's petition by his old age (*senectute ad quem devenit*). In the year of this testimony (1509) Boryszewski was 74²⁴⁶. His request could not have resulted only from entering a certain age, since the number of the years cited was much bigger than the acknowledged threshold of 60 years. In all probability it was the bad condition of his health and considerably weakened physical fitness combined with his advanced age that was the basis for defining his state as old age. Among peasants, because of the limited knowledge of chronological criteria, the loss of stamina must have been an even more essential, perhaps an exclusive symptom of ageing. We have no reason to suspect the inhabitants of the Polish countryside of dividing human life on a different basis than it was done among West-European peasants. According to the above-quoted G. Minois, this basis was above all the ability to do manual work. A permanent loss of strength by an adult meant he/she was old. This can be proved by the example of a peasant from the estates of the Poznań chapter, Jan Kosmatka, who *senio confectus et egritudine diuturna preventus* arrived in 1525 at a session of the chapter asking for permission to settle his son on his farm²⁴⁷. Worn-out by age and ailments, this subject wanted to hand his farm over to his successor, but he had to obtain permission from his ecclesiastical liege lord. In keeping with mutual interest, the canons complied with the request of their subject and ordered the local administrator to make suitable arrangements. The above case illustrates at the same time the attitude of peasants themselves to the problem of old age in its more afflicting forms,

²⁴⁵ *Acta capituli Gneznensis* (henceforward: *ACGnez.*), in: *ACNIE*, vol. I, rec. 2683–1509, p. 593.

²⁴⁶ See K. Śmigiel, *Boryszewski Róża Andrzej*, in: *Encyklopedia Katolicka*, vol. 2, Lublin 1985, p. 831.

²⁴⁷ *ACGnez.*, rec. 3012–1525, p. 653.

when strength for further work and independent life was failing. Both examples, of the primate and the peasant, reveal another, extra-chronological criterion of old age — permanent weakness with all its consequences (in the case of the peasant — the handing over of the farm).

In illiterate communities there was still another, a third determinant of advanced age. This was considerable knowledge of by-gone times, which was a consequence of a long life and rich experience. Thus the conviction of somebody's old age was bound up with the role of the institution of collective memory, enacted precisely by old people in traditional societies²⁴⁸. To put it in other words, large knowledge of the past (i. e. surpassing that of one's neighbours) pointed to the old age of a given person (*vide: pamiętnicy* – those who remember).

Thus it was these three determinants (characteristic appearance, conspicuous weakness of the body, large knowledge of the past), rather than the real length of life measured in years, that most frequently decided that people were classified as old in medieval and early-modern Poland. These criteria were subjective and from our point of view, very imprecise. Theoretically, on their basis a relatively young person could be acknowledged as old (e.g. because of prematurely turning grey). Still I think that despite this lack of precision, classification of definite people as aged was not generally at variance with the actual reality. The understanding of old age presented above resulted from collective experience, common sense and observation of individual cases of biological decay. It seems doubtful that a man in his thirties who was worn-out by life, or prematurely turned grey, could be regarded as a long-lived person. The local people might not have been able to count a longer period of time in years (and consequently not have known the dates of their births). It seems certain, however, that just like in primitive societies, they were able to establish the hierarchy of seniority according to age within the framework of the local community. They were certainly able to associate a fact of somebody's life with simultaneous events and define who of their neighbours was born the longest time ago, who was whose grandfather or aged father, and who remembered more than others²⁴⁹. Therefore the terminology presented here

²⁴⁸ See, e.g. M. Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Paris 1994, pp. 103–107.

²⁴⁹ See M. Nilsson, *op. cit.*, pp. 98, 100.

seems to be a credible written trace of the aged inhabitants of Polish lands.

VI. Conclusions

If we confront the qualitative terminology of old age with examples of its chronological definition we shall see that a qualitative and subjective perception of this phenomenon dominated in Polish lands in the era under analysis. That is, old age was predominantly seen through the prism of concrete persons, and not as a stage of human life conceived in an abstract way. In contrast to Western Europe, where especially since the 13th c., old age, its thresholds, possible divisions and longevity were frequently discussed, in Poland such discussions appeared later. Only in the 15th c. did there appear more frequent attempts at a quantification of the phenomenon of old age. The process of ageing was sometimes perceived as two successive stages, and their starting points were sporadically defined. Just as in the West, in Polish lands too, for the majority of people who conceived of old age quantitatively, it started after reaching 60 years of life (in Europe also frequently 70 years), and constituted one period. However, the West-European writings contain incomparably more versions of the threshold of old age expressed in years. The boundaries of 50 and 70 years appeared in Polish writings of that era exceptionally and were not widely accepted. The difference in the demographic realities of the Middle Ages as against the early modern era, did not have a decisive influence on the concepts of the threshold of old age expressed in years either in Europe or in Poland. Our native reflections upon this threshold and longevity are scanty, compared to the discussions of these subjects in European writings of this era. The few attempts I quoted were in principle products of a better educated clergy (including the Hussites). The sporadic secular examples only prove the rule. There were many reasons and circumstances underlying such a state of affairs. In the first place let us cite the fact that ancient and medieval intellectual heritage was not known to wider circles of Polish society at that time. The ability to think in abstract terms was not widespread, either. Let us add that medieval Poles were not very sensitive to the lapse of time and showed little interest in its precise measuring. As the example of Mazovian society shows, this changed only as a result of colonization under

German law, the development of education at parish level and consequent development of written culture²⁵⁰.

And finally let us cite the vitality of tradition, resulting from the usefulness of earlier solutions. Earlier, qualitative methods of describing old people proved right and there was no need to replace them with chronological criteria on a larger scale. A man was old if he looked old, felt old and performed social functions old men were supposed to fulfil. Let us add that some attempts to define the age of old people in years were made on the basis of their appearance. Old age continued to be mainly understood as a state on the basis of which the years of somebody's life were estimated, and not the other way round. However, the dilemma of how to understand the last stage of life gathered strength in the course of time, which presumably was due to the further spread of the chronological understanding of old age. This is corroborated by characteristic words of Mikołaj of Mościska, contained in his treatise *S. Artis Poenitentiariae Tyrocinium* (1625). While considering the question of absolving old people from strict fasting (a problem that was not discussed in medieval Poland at all), the author of this work said: "According to frequent opinion, old age comes at 70. (...) Yet it should be known that according to some people this stage does not of itself absolve [from the duty to observe the fast — G. M.], unless it is accompanied by an emaciation characteristic of old age"²⁵¹. So it can be seen that the reduction of the qualitative understanding of old age to the rank of common knowledge and its replacing by chronological determinants of the autumn of life was a very slow process, which developed over centuries.

(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)

²⁵⁰ See G. Myśliwski, *Between Memory*, pp. 27–36.

²⁵¹ *Senectus autem secundum communiorem opinionem in 70 anno obvenire solet. Verum sciendum est, quod haec aetas secundum aliquos ex se sola non excipit, si non adsit aliqua senilis aetatis imbecillitas.* I quote the Latin text from: A. Karśnicki, *Posty w dawnej Polsce (Fasting in Old Poland)*, "Przegląd Teologiczny", vol. 12, 1931, p. 346, note 505. On Mikołaj Mościcki see J. Kowalski, *Mikołaj z Mościsk (Mikołaj of Mościska)*, in: *PSB*, vol. 21, Wrocław 1976, pp. 128–130.