Studies

MYTH AND HISTORY

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HISTORY IN MYTHS

Memory of a past which the members of a community can refer to in order to explain their specific, unique qualities and which is a key to their identification plays an important role in the formation and consolidation of communities[1]. This is a well known and richly documented opinion. Selected historical fragments, a collection of watchwords, information and associations, constitute, in the first place, a more or less universal canon of knowledge; secondly, a body of watchwords which make it possible to recognise the community's members; and thirdly, the base of a general knowledge regarded as axiomatic. This knowledge contains information which becomes "sacred" and irrefutable for

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[1] Let me cite but a few books and essays, for the literature dealing with this subject is extremely rich: K. P o m i a n, *Przeszłość jako przedmiot wiary (The Past as the Object of Faith)*, Warszawa 1968, pp. 11, 61 ff.; J. B a n a s z k i e w i c z, *Polskie dzieje bajeczne mistrza Wincentego Kadłubka (Master Wincenty Kadłubek's Fabulous History of Poland)*, Wrocław 1998, pp. 8 ff.; *Allegory, Myth and Symbol*, ed. M. W. B l o o m f i e l d, Cambridge Mass. 1981, pp. 13 ff.; A. Gary W r i g h t, J. D. D i r k s, *Myth as environmental message*, "Ethnos", vol. 48, III–IV, 1983, p. 160; J. L. H e n d e r s o n, *A Bridge across the Time. The Role of the Myths in History*, London 1975; M. E l i a d e, *Mythes, rêves et mystères*, Paris 1957, p. 22; i d e m, *Le Sacre et le Profane*, Paris 1965, p. 60; G. D u m e z i l, *Mythe et epopée*, Paris 1977, pass.; J. T o p o l s k i, *O pojęciu teorii w badaniu historycznym. Teoria i mit (The Concept of Theory in Historical Research. Theory and Myth)*, in: *Pamiętnik XIII Powszechnego Zjazdu Historyków Polskich*, I, Wrocław 1986, p. 210; F. G r a u s, *Lebendige Vergangenheit Überlieferung im Mittelalter und in den Vorstellungen vom Mittelalter*, Köln 1975, pp. 35, 81, 182; cf. also the survey of the question and of problems concerning myth: C. D e p t u ł a, *Galla Anonima mit genezy Polski (Gallus Anonimus' Myth concerning the Genesis of Poland)*, Lublin 2000, pp. 32 ff.

a given group of people, but is myth from the point of view of present–day cultural anthropology. It forms the foundation of a general vision of the world, the visible world close at hand and the distant one. The scholars' dispute over the character of such visions — whether they are a result of faith or an attempt to present a "scientific" construction on the basis of opinions prevailing in a given epoch — does not change the fact that this "nursery of stereotypes"[2] has qualities which are of essential importance in the process of discovering and grasping its social functions.

This is not the place to present all possible interpretations and definitions of the word "myth". It would, however, be worth while to cite some opinions which have exerted an influence on the way historians view myths[3]. The philosopher Wilhelm W u n d t defined myths as a reflection of reality in the form of fantastic images; Carl Gustav J u n g believed that myths are reflections of primaeval conceptions which stem from human nature. The historian Franz G r a u s asserted that myths are stories about real events in the past, presented in a way understandable to contemporary men and durable enough to survive many generations, stories that are generally accepted and approved of. For the sociologist Roland B a r t h e s myth is "a system of communication", "a form of social communication"; for Mircea E l i a d e, an expert in religious matters, myth "in colloquial language denotes everything that opposes reality", for a historian, myth "relates a sacral history, that is, what happened at the beginning of the world". The Polish historian Stanisław P i e k a r c z y k regards myths as models of the world, expressed by a complicated system of signs which are understandable to contemporary men. Georges D u m e z i l, an anthropologist of culture, believed that myths are a copy, a reflection of archetypal themes which in the remote past put the universe in order and which survived in incomplete forms until later days. The logician and philosopher Ernst C a s s i r e r regarded myths as symbols which in a model form convey knowledge about the whole sphere

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[2] J. P r o k o p, *Polskie Universum (The Polish Universe)*, "Znak", No. 390–391, 1987, p. 15.

[3] Cf. fn. 1. Their views are presented by C. D e p t u ł a, *Galla Anonima*, pp. 36 ff.; H. S a m s o n o w i c z, *O "historii prawdziwej". Mity, legendy i podania jako źródło historyczne (On "Real History". Myths, Legends and Tradition as an Historical Source)*, Gdańsk 1997, p. 6.

of culture, the sphere created by the spirit. Jerzy T o p o l s k i, a Polish historian and methodologist, has classified myths, dividing them into four kinds: myths which are stories about the beginning of the world; myths which are projections of the future; narrative (historiographic) myths describing past events; and "fundamental myths" ("fundamental metaphors") depicting the universe and its order. There is no need to cite any more examples, let us only point out that myths are important for a proper understanding of historical sources. This is related to a few separate research problems. Of course, it is advisable, and sometimes even necessary, to reflect on what provided the basis for the content of the existing myths. It is necessary to check when the message functioned as a myth and when it was "degraded" (as Czesław D e p t u ł a says)[4] to the role of a legend or a fairy–tale. But what seems to be particularly important for the historian is to examine the successive layers of a mythical story, to try to find out to what extent they were proposals connected with the times when they functioned, to what extent they expressed spiritual needs, longings, traumatic experiences, complexes and desires. Myths should therefore be examined as information on the situation *hic et nunc*, as information about the social, spiritual, political and economic needs that made the existence of the myth possible. For a historian, this is a task which also involves an evaluation of historiography. For the history of historiography can from a certain, undoubtedly one-sided point of view be regarded as "a history of the centuries–old creation of myths and of the struggle to free ourselves from them", as Witold K u l a wrote. Andrzej Feliks G r a b s k i drew attention to the double role of historiography, pointing out that it has both created and abolished myths[5].

Pershaps "worlds without history" did exist, as anthropologists maintain. They may have existed in very primitive, early stages of human communities. As these communities developed, attempts were made in a more or less advanced form to create fictional stories referring to old times, to the beginning of remembered events. Jacek B a n a s z k i e w i c z, a prominent Polish

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[4] C. Deptuła, *Galla Anonima*, p. 45.

[5] A. F. G r a b s k i, *Historiografia — mitotwórstwo — mitoburstwo (Historiography — Myth–Creation — Myth–Abolition)*, in: *Historia, mity, interpretacje*, ed. A. B a r - s z c z e w s k a – K r u p a, Łódź 1996, p. 29.

expert and interpreter of these stories, has drawn attention to
their "efficiency as culture–building elements in a concrete his-
torical structure"[6]. This can be regarded as the basic reason why
research should be conducted into all fabulous themes referring
to various epochs, for in each of these stories a historian can find
three components. The first, which most impresses anthropolog-
ists of culture, is the vision of the world created since time
immemorial on the basis of observation of nature in order to
explain its laws; it concerns conceptions based on relatively
durable ways of thinking. Another component is — and this is
what information–hunters are interested in — collective memory
preserved in frequently repeated stories concerning past events
or phenomena, stories which had been processed by the "speak-
ing" generations before they were perpetuated by the "writing"
generations. The needs of the people who repeat stories regarded
as indisputable truth constitute the third component, and this is
the main subject to be discussed here.

In times which are better known, watchwords that were
understandable to the members of a community were not only
calls that brought forth a response, calls whose message was
grasped, though sometimes incompletely; they also met essential
security requirements; they strengthened the individuals' sense
of their own value, defined their place in the world. This was a
fact already in tribal times, as can be inferred from many Baby-
lonian, Greek, Roman and Germanic legends[7]. Ideas emphasising
a particularly exceptional past assumed special importance when
nations began to emerge in the 14th century. Naturally, the
ethnic community to which various social groups — dukes,
knights, burghers, the clergy, even the peasants — claimed to
belong had to be a highly commendable community. The answer
was a message, let us call it a myth, which laid stress on the
community's ancient origin and brave deeds, thus adding praise-
worthy qualities to its collective life. The Franks maintained that
they were descendants of the Trojans and that freedom (*freie* =
Franken) had always been their attribute, as F r e d e g a r wrote
as early as the 7th century. According to the Arthurian legend,
the Britons also came from Troy for they were descendants of

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[6] J. B a n a s z k i e w i c z, *Polskie dzieje*, p. 6.

[7] Cf. S. P i e k a r c z y k, *Mitologia germańska (Germanic Mythology)*, Warszawa
1979, p. 9.

Brutus who arrived in Britain via Rome. In later times the Lithuanians claimed to be of Roman origin and the Poles traced their genealogy back to the ancient Sarmatians[8]. One of the most prominent mythical heroes of the Middle Ages was Charlemagne, founder of Latin Europe's community and of the unity (proposed rather than real) of Western civilisation. In Slavonic languages his name became a common noun (*król, kral, korol*) denoting monarchic dignity. In the course of time he became a representative of the golden age, a symbol of happy times. He was also a symbol of *sacrum Romanum Imperium*, a concept referring to the idea of European unity. The idea faded a little during the growth of the nation–states but it survived until the 20th century, manifesting itself, for instance, in the dispute over Charlemagne's mother tongue (*Karl der Grosse* or *Charlemagne*), over his membership of the German or the French nation.

References to the past were made by scholars who knew ancient writings. The form in which they were circulated met the needs of the day, but as time went by, they began to function independently of their genesis. An instructive example is one of the best known medieval myths concerning the history of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table[9]. It seems that in the 12th century when the English monarchy was experiencing a rapid demographic growth and its political importance was rising, theories justifying its aspirations and stressing its significance became indispensable. A large part of England, especially after Henry II took over Aquitaine, was a fief of the kings of France. This state of affairs called for the intervention of history, and the history of King Arthur justified, to a large extent, the claims of the Plantagenets and of the English power élite. The Arthurian legend not only traced the Britons' origin back to the Romans but

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[8] These questions have been discussed by H. S a m s o n o w i c z, *Dziedzictwo średniowiecza. Mity i rzeczywistość (The Legacy of the Middle Ages. Myths and Reality)*, Wrocław 1991, pp. 19, 76, 81.

[9] It is worth mentioning a few books from the rich literature dealing with this subject: R. H. F l e t c h e r, *The Arthurian Material in the Chronicles*, Boston 1906; M. R. B l a k e s l e e, *Mythic Structures in the Old French Versions in the Tristan Legend*, Ann Arbor, M. 1979; E. S. W h i t t l e s e y, *Symbols and Legends in Western Art*, New York 1972; J. M a r k a l e, *Le roi Arthur et la société celtique*, Paris 1983; L. A. L o o m i s, *Adventures in the Middle Ages: a Memorial Collection of Essays and Studies*, New York 1962; i d e m, *The Development of Arthurian Romance*, London 1969; J. M a r x, *La legende arthurienne et le Graal*, Paris 1952; cf. M. O s s o w s k a, *Ethos rycerski i jego odmiany (The Knights' Ethos and Its Various Versions)*, Warszawa 1973.

also recalled their victories in battles against German, Scandinavian and Irish tribes as well as their victorious invasions of Gaul (that is France); it even attributed the foundation of Paris to them. Claims to the imperial throne may not have been a political programme but they reflected the moods of the English knights in a real political situation. The end of Arthur's story, the fact that the king was borne off to the island of Avalon (or beyond the horizon) probably harmonised with antique stories expressing the hope that a good ruler will return and restore a happy, just state. It is interesting that the myth about "an ideal state", a Utopia, has survived until the present day, in any case in Poland, being reflected in the faith in the existence of a "normal state", though nobody has ever documented its existence.

This does not mean that this myth made use only of what was required for political reasons. When it was taking shape, the myth of King Arthur drew on "learned" antique themes by its use not only of the name Brutus, the eponym of the Britons (was it the Brutus who overthrew Tarquinius the Proud?), but also of some other themes. We do not know whether the "fiery rain" which plagued the earth for many days was the author's invention or a reference to events that had been seen, heard or read about. Nor do we know whether the diverse beasts presented in the stories (giants, sea monsters) came from earlier accounts or were invented for the new story. Some themes (e.g. the quest of the Holy Graal) were undoubtedly a rather free interpretation of the *Gospels*. What seems to be more important is to find the original, local store of information that made it possible to construe the story. What interested scholars were the actual persons (did King Arthur exist and if so, when and in what shape) and themes which might have referred to folklore, to the mythological traditions of the Celts. Most probably these questions cannot be clarified unequivocally but there is not a shadow of a doubt that the research conducted so far has yielded interesting material in this respect. What is more important for a historian is the historical conditions in which the plot emerged. The knights' ethos (the traces of which are still visible in European culture), the custom of giving one's word of honour, loyalty to the seigneur, the knights' equality (at the Round Table) and their crusading mission reflect 12th century relations, the society of that time, its needs and views. They show the knights' world, everyday life at a castle,

feasts, love affairs, tournaments, beautiful (though not very faithful) wives, favourite dogs and the most important symbol of social rank: the sword bearing the name of Excalibur. It cannot be denied that these stories contain traces of older myths from Celtic times, maybe even from before the arrival of the Romans in Britain. The great magician Merlin is believed to have existed in the old Celtic pantheon, and questions can be asked about the origin of Arthur's knights. Was Lohengrin in any way linked to the water element? Do not Baldur and Kay resemble giants from old sagas? These are questions which are certainly worth discussing. The legend's literary themes probably also contain motifs that had for centuries threaded their way in the productions of various peoples. Among them is the motif of waiting for a good ruler as well as intervention by supernatural forces which guide human behaviour in an established way. It seems to be beyond doubt that myths are built of various kinds of stuff. But it can be assumed that their content expresses, first and foremost, a society's needs, and that they are reduced to the rank of fairy-tales or legends when they lose their significance in a new social or political situation. It is worth verifying these opinions by analysing what has been accepted in Polish historiography. Was there a generally accepted myth about the beginning of the state? Contrary to many opinions, it seems that there was no such myth at the threshold of Poland's statehood. Jacek B a n a s z k i e - w i c z [10] may be right when in the version constructed by the Anonymous Gaul he detects remnants of a myth described by George D u m e z i l, a myth stemming from a vision of the world that can be traced back to very distant times, to the existence of the Indo–European community. Two emissaries come to the house of a ploughman who is a subject of the duke in the castle. Their actions, the miracles they work and their prophecies indicate that they are supernatural, heavenly beings. "Food is miraculously multiplied", conversion to the true faith is predicted, and the emissaries prophesy that the ploughman's descendants will win fame and glory. In his comment on these events the chronicler lays stress on the emissaries' divine mission and emphasises that the elevation of Poland's future rulers (who were in power when

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[10] J. B a n a s z k i e w i c z, *Podanie o Piaście i Popielu. Studium porównawcze nad wczesnośredniowiecznymi tradycjami dynastycznymi (The Legend about Piast and Popiel. A comparative study in early medieval dynastic traditions)*, Warszawa 1986.

Gallus Anonimus wrote his chronicle) was a direct intervention
of the "King of kings". The researcher Czesław D e p t u ł a rightly
concludes therefore that the myth about Poland's genesis pre-
sented in Gallus Anonimus' chronicle is a picture of the beginning
of Poland, historically adapted to the Christian world[11]. This
adaptation is accomplished by a dynasty chosen by God, like the
chosen few in the *Old Testament.* According to Deptuła, the myth
is an interpretation which, making use of a vast scale of Biblical
symbols and symbolic historiographic formulations, presents
national history as a history created by God. This conclusion calls
for a few corrections. The first concerns Deptuła's qualification
of this version as a myth. It does not seem that the version, in
particular when it was written, was generally known outside the
milieu of the court and Church élites (probably not even by the
whole of this milieu). Political propaganda, practised in the old
days by the court and nowadays by political parties, is not a myth;
it can at most be defined as a programme which assumes
mythical qualities in the course of time. Another correction
concerns the transformation of this "court myth" by a subsequent
chronicler a hundred years later; it was probably then that this
presentation of the beginning of Poland became more generally
known. The myth made a real career in the following centuries
when it became regarded as "true knowledge" and was generally
known and accepted. But again, and this is another reservation,
it was accepted not as a legitimation of the dynasty's rule but as
evidence of the glorious beginning of the state, of the community
of privileged groups and finally of the nation. The political geo-
graphy of the myth began to be corrected quite early, depending
on which territory became important. As the ambitions of the
Polish ruling class grew, the time and space horizons of the state's
mythical beginning expanded too. The plots of the myth were
made part of the events known to erudites from universal history;
the beginning of Polish society was traced back to the time of the
Flood. This version of the beginning of the Polish state was spread
widely in later times when various historiographic currents tried
to find real historical facts in it[12]. The literal version was rejected

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[11] C. D e p t u ł a, *Galla Anonima,* p. 353.

[12] Cf. *Kronika Polska przez Prokosza w wieku X napisana,* Warszawa 1825, a
seriously treated chronicle written by Przybysław D i a m e n t o w s k i, in which
Poland's history begins, as follows from the first date mentioned in it, in "the Year

by more serious scholars and it is questionable whether it performed the function of a myth in broad social circles. It only served as evidence of Poland's birth in a dim, distant path and it was sometimes used by various political (e.g. peasant) groupings to claim that the Polish nation had existed since time immemorial, just as other nations traced their origin to old, legendary times.

The original version could have become a myth in the sense used by anthropologists of culture, had the circumstances remained unchanged. But when the ruling dynasty changed, the profession of the main hero changed too (from a ploughman he became a wheelwright). What remained unchanged was the eponym of the dynasty, Piast, and the names of his legendary descendants, whose existence is however sometimes questioned. A myth can, of course, also contain real facts. The castle near which these events were said to have taken place was indeed the oldest centre of authority in the state. Some researchers try to establish the time when the first Polish dynasty assumed power on the basis of the number of generations. But the story no longer performs a sacral function. The reason why it has been known for eight hundred years is that its message has changed. After a time its aim was no longer to sanctify the ruling dynasty, as it was at the beginning of the 12th century, but to meet the needs of the society which, like other peoples tried to trace back its history to distant, legendary times. The legendary themes were questioned quite early. In the 16th century the great Polish poet Jan K o c h a n o w s k i criticised stories about another historiographic but unreal hero, Lech, who had been presented as the founder of the Polish state[13].

This development of a myth can be confirmed by another literary and ideological theme the significance of which has been throughly examined in literature. I have in mind the myth of Poland as the bulwark of Christian Europe[14]. Its genesis is probably due to the work of the chancellery of the Polish ruler,

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of the World" 2032 (p. XV).

[13] This question has been discussed in detail by J. M a l i c k i, *Mity narodowe. Lechiada (National Myths. Lechiada)*, Wrocław 1982.

[14] J. T a z b i r, *Polskie przedmurze chrześcijańskiej Europy. Mity a rzeczywistość historyczna (The Polish Bulwark of Christian Europe. Myths and the Historical Reality)*, Warszawa 1982, pp. 5 ff.

Ladislaus the Elbow–High. In 1318, a meeting of dignitaries of Ladislaus' duchy sent a supplication to the pope in Avignon, asking him to agree to the coronation of Ladislaus. The political situation was complicated at that time for claims to the title were also laid by the king of Bohemia, John of Luxembourg, who had a much greater influence in the papal curia. What is more, Ladislaus was in conflict with the Teutonic Knights' Order over Pomerania and the Order also had closer and broader contacts with the head of the Church. In view of these circumstances, Ladislaus' lawyers prepared the following argumentation. Poland lies on the border of Christendom, neighbouring on pagan Lithuania and "heretic lands" (a reference to Halicz Ruthenia with which, as a matter of fact, Ladislaus had friendly relations). The strength of Christendom depends on the strength of its frontiers. A kingdom ruled by an annointed ruler is stronger than a duchy. The argument, backed by a rise in the Polish rate of Peter's Pence, met with success and Ladislaus was crowned king. Some courts called him "king of Cracow", preserving the title of king of Poland to John of Luxembourg, but nevertheless, the royal crown was restored to Poland. The idea of Ladislaus' advisers was not original. Hungary, Cyprus and Venice also named themselves "shields of Christendom" (*scutum christianitatis*), but the expression made a career in Poland. In the 17th century the existence of the Commonwealth of the Two Nations was threatened by heretic states: Mohameddan Turkey, Orthodox Russia and Protestant Sweden. The conviction that Poland and Lithuania were called upon to defend Catholicism became an essential ideological component in the struggle to preserve the independence of the country. What is more, as the political and economic crisis grew and the gap between the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and the more developed countries of Europe widened, the conviction was a comfort to the inhabitants of the country. We are poor and tormented by fate, but as defenders of the faith we are worth more than other people. The more the myth allowed the people to overcome their inferiority and backwardness complex, the more important it became.

The conviction that although Poland could not boast of economic and scientific achievements she had contributed spiritual qualities to the development of the European continent grew in strength after the loss of independence, consolidating the

Poles' opinion that their country held an important place in the ranks of defenders of "the true faith". This conviction, kept up in the 19th century, when Poland was under foreign rule, was in the Poles' view confirmed at the threshold of the 20th century during the war against bolshevik Russia. "The miracle on the Vistula", the victorious 1920 battle which led to Poland's victory in the war, became an important argument in the political propaganda of many Polish political parties and a permanent component in the curriculum of Polish schools. Later, the collapse of the communist bloc made it possible to preserve the belief that Poland has played an exceptional role in the history of Europe, for she contributed to the liberation of Eastern Europe. It is by no means an accident that now that democracy has been restored and Poland has the chance of joining the European Union, the younger generations of Poles are losing faith in their country's exceptional historical role; they have found other possibilities of psychological compensation than belief in the exceptional historical mission of their society and nation. They are thus contributing to the fall of the antemurale myth.

The category of myths also includes the myth of "the aliens"[15], that is, the stereotypes which shape a society's opinions on people who use a different language, profess a different faith and have different customs. Stereotypes of this kind were engendered by the desire to emphasise the value of one's own nation, by fear of unknown, frequently dangerous, customs. A state of uncertainty, a sense of danger and the consequent aversion frequently emerged when new forms of social organisation, unknown actions, different ways of people–to–people communication were noticed in other people, who were sometimes more numerous and better armed. In many cases the newcomers — Germans, Jews, Wallons, Turks, Tartars — posed a real threat to the local people. Sometimes they threatened their lives, as was the case during the Tartar invasions, sometimes they posed an economic threat, if

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[15] The literature dealing with this subject is very rich, only to mention the collection of studies *Swojskość i cudzoziemszczyzna w dziejach kultury polskiej (Polish and Foreign Elements in the History of Polish Culture)*, Warszawa 1973; S. S a l m o n o w i c z, *Polacy i Niemcy wobec siebie. Postawy, opinie, stereotypy (Mutual Attitudes between Poles and Germans. Attitudes, Opinions, Stereotypes)*, Olsztyn 1993, and the volume *Polacy i Niemcy, historia — kultura — polityka (Poles and Germans, History — Culture — Politics)*, ed. A. L a w a t y, H. O r ł o w s k i, Poznań 2003.

they were better prepared for the requirements of the new econo-
my. In the latter case, their growing wealth, their ability to make
use of unknown working tools and instruments (especially in the
field of money economy) endangered the old status of various
social strata. The economic factor seems to have played an
important role in shaping a negative attitude to the aliens whose
arrival undermined the previous hierarchies of importance and
prestige, and this is turn brought forth a hostile or scornful
general attitude to aliens. Such opinions assumed special impor-
tance in times of political setbacks, economic crises or social
tensions. In his essay on nationalism Stefan C z a r n o w s k i [16]
says that nationalism "was reflected ... first and foremost in the
hunt for «internal enemies», «traitors» ... who were presented to
the mob as the cause of all troubles and as the persons on whom
it could wrench its fury". Naturally, these aliens have to be well
known. It is impossible to refer to people who are unknown in a
given society. In Poland the choice of enemies of the state and
nation was confined to well known nationalities. The simplest
thing was to choose the object of aversion among those ethnic
groups that competed with the local people. It was the newcomers
from Germany who stood out against other foreigners, for they
were not only richer and better prepared for deals on the money
market but were also more skilful in diplomatic services, foreign
contacts and in chancellery work. They were aliens who posed a
threat to the existing élites by changing the hierarchy of import-
ance and social prestige. To this must be added the trauma
caused by political conflicts, among which the wars against the
German Teutonic Knights' Order occupied an important place.
The stereotype of the German as an enemy was shaped in the
13th and early 14th centuries and remained in force with greater
or lesser intensity until the 1409–1411 war against the Order.
Poland's victory in the battle of Grunwald (1410) was noted in the
chronicles all over Europe and greatly increased the prestige of
the Jagiellonian dynasty ruling in Poland. 14th century songs
had reflected the Poles' hatred of the Germans, probably giving
rise to the saying that "as long as the world lasts, a German will
never be a brother to a Pole". After the successful Grunwald battle
the songs composed when the Jagiellons were at the summit of

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[16] S. C z a r n o w s k i, *Nacjonalizm (Nationalism)*, in: *Polska refleksja nad naro-
dem*, eds. W. J. B u r s z t a, J. N o w a k, K. W a w r u c h a, Poznań 2002, p. 105.

their power, ruling over four European countries, emphasised the strength of the German Order and its prowess, and presented it as a worthy adversary[17]. Opinions on the enemy changed in the next centuries owing to the shift in the balance of political power. The wars were waged on many fronts — Russian, Ukrainian, Swedish and Turkish — with the exception of the German front (though the conflict with Brandenburg opened a period of growing enmity). The myth remained, but it was another alien nation, not the Germans, that became the symbolic enemy. It was the Russians, Turks or Swedes, while the dislike of the Germans abated. What is more, the picture of the "alien" became more complex, for dissimilarity in faith, in religious denomination, began to be taken into account.

The old 16th century glory of the Commonwealth of the Two Nations was based on religious tolerance (secured by the Constitution of 1573)[18], a tolerance unknown in Europe, which was then riven by religious wars. The basic tie that united the ruling strata of that dualistic state was membership in the noble estate which comprised people who spoke Polish, Ruthenian, Lithuanian and German. In this multilingual society it was not ethnicity that determined who belonged to the "political nation" but the socio–legal status. This remained in force until the end of the 18th century; what changed was the attitude to other religious denominations. This had important consequences. The group of "aliens" did not include peasants, whatever language they spoke, or burghers, who were frequently of German, Ruthenian or Armenian origin. These were certainly "worse" people but they were not "aliens". The lower level of this "worse" group also included the growing Jewish population. Each social class had its own opinion about the Jews. The noblemen regarded the Jews as "worse" people but not as "aliens". This is why pogroms of Jews and trials for sacrilege were less frequent in Poland then in other countries, despite the clergy's programmatic dislike of the Jews.

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[17] H. S a m s o n o w i c z, *Bitwa grunwaldzka w świadomości dawnych pokoleń Polaków (The Battle of Grunwald in the Consciousness of Earlier Generations of Poles)*, in: *Grunwald w świadomości Polaków*, Warszawa 1981, p. 38.

[18] Cf. J. T a z b i r, *Reformacja — kontrreformacja — tolerancja (The Reformation — the Counter–Reformation — Tolerance)*, Wrocław 1996; i d e m, *Tradycje wieloetnicznej Rzeczypospolitej (The Traditions of the Multi–ethnic Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth)*, in: *Inni wśród swoich*, Warszawa 1994.

During the Counter–Reformation all people professing a non–Catholic religion began to be regarded in Poland as "aliens". This was not a rapid process for many magnates professed the Orthodox or a Protestant faith, but the growing danger to Poland's existence as an independent state led to the identification of Catholicism with Polishness. It can be assumed that this attitude was characteristic first and foremost of those social milieux which believed that their religion testified to the importance of their position. This was of course a belief favoured by the nobility, a belief that was undoubtedly also effectively promoted by the Catholic clergy in the countryside, where membership of a parish community made the peasants feel secure and important in the social and cultural structures which they knew.

The conviction that the Germans were the Poles' "natural" enemies, that they were "aliens" who threatened Polish identity, emerged again after a break of four hundred years, and was strengthened during the partitions. The reasons were fully rational. The repressive measures used by the Austrians in the first half of the 19th century, the liquidation of Cracow's status as a free city and, first and foremost, the attempts to germanise the Prussian zone of Poland were accompanied by a growing German colonisation of Polish villages in the Russian part of Poland. The Germans were again the main enemy for the generation which fought against *Drang nach Osten*, against the German attempts to gain *Lebensraum* during the time of the Second and the Third Reich, and for the generation which had to stand up to the Germans during World War II. It may look like a paradox, but during the period of growing resistance to communist power the Poles found another foe No. 1, the Russians or, to be more precise, "Soviet people". Gradually the Germans ceased to be regarded as "an eternal enemy" and began to be viewed as neighbours with whom one could have common economic and even political interests. However, the tradition of German danger, the fear that the German might buy up Polish land and raise territorial claims is still upheld in Poland by some political orientations.

Generally speaking, the opinions about "aliens", about foreigners, kept changing, depending on social requirements and political relations. No steady pattern can be established in this respect. Xenophobia ran parallel to fascination with novelties brought from abroad. Such was the situation in the Middle Ages

when despite the growing dislike of aliens a selfgoverning system according to alien models was introduced in towns and villages, and it was the same in modern times when West European Renaissance currents and later Enlightenment trends existed side by side with the conviction that the model of the Polish state was unique. This did not change in the 19th century either. The process can be clearly seen in the influence exerted by the ideas of the French Revolution, Italian Freemasons, English Utopians, the Russian Decembrists and the ideas formulated by M a r x. It can also be seen in the development of Polish literature, both Romantic and Positivist, and in the arts. Efforts were made to modernise industry, develop towns, reform agriculture on the basis of foreign patterns, but different opinions were voiced at the same time[19]. Aleksander J a ł o w i e c k i, a writer who objected to the adoption of foreign patterns, wrote: "the foreign mind is in no way similar to the Polish mind ... he who wants Poland to survive should drive all foreign influence out of the Poles' minds and hearts". For a large part of Polish society the "aliens" were associated with evil. "A German devil in a Venetian carriage" was an expression used to emphasise the evil brought from abroad. Drawings showing peasants who with forks and stakes in their hands chase the first bicyclists at the end of the 19th century illustrate to what extent "outlandishness" was associated, as in the Middle Ages, with new customs, technological inventions and novelties. What is more, during the period when the Poles were deprived of their state, of their political and economic institutions, and when the activity of their cultural institutions was curtailed, memory of the past was the only substratum of national identity. Admittedly, Poland could not claim great achievements in technology, science and art, and but for a rather short period when it enjoyed great power status in the 15th and 16th centuries it was not an outstanding actor in European politics, but the Poles believed that they were "the conscience of nations", that their qualities were an extremely valuable contribution to universal culture. This was a popular, simplified version of the Messianistic ideas proclaimed by the great Polish poets of the Romantic period who presented martyrised Poland as the "Winkelried of nations", as a country sacrificing its life for the good of all. There is no need

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[19] This has been discussed in more detail by H. S a m s o n o w i c z, *O "historii prawdziwej"*, p. 112.

to emphasise that this view inspired self–esteem, weakened collective complexes and was a compensation for political misfortunes.

Of course, this was not the view of the whole Polish community. There were many positivists in Poland who propagated "work from the very foundations", that is, the development of industry, education and science. Patriotic songs eulogised "the example given by Bonaparte", "the July sun" (the French revolution of 1830), and the ideas of socialism were gaining popularity at the end of the 19th century, but the conviction that what was Polish was good and what was alien, foreign, was evil, was for many people a paradigm, a myth that was maintained in various popular historical compendia which were read and narrated "to cheer people up". This difference in the attitude to foreign models and to the Poles' own tradition can be illustrated by two expressions which are more than a century and a half old: cosmopolitanism and internationalism. The former was a synonym of denationalisation, of deviation from the right Polish way of life and Polish customs; in extreme cases it was a synonym for betrayal of the most precious values: faith, honour, freedom. Internationalism was a watchword calling on people to set common human ideals above regional local interests. Both myths — internationalism and cosmopolitanism — were for a long time products of thoughts and programmes which had less contact with reality and ideology than with dreams and pragmatism of political activity. Both myths reflected the attitude–building programmes and intentions of the leading élites, of opinion–building circles. An examination of the qualities associated with various "aliens" will show us two aspects of reality and political situation in a given period; it will show us social moods, expectations and desires as well as the state's policy, its programme of action at a given time. The German was in Poland a symbol of an "eternal", "treacherous" enemy with whom the Poles had struggled "for centuries" (contrary to facts)[20].

The wishes of the authorities did not always correspond to society's feelings. For instance, under the communist rule the slogan about "the fraternal friendship with the nations of the Soviet Union" did not penetrate the consciousness of the gover-

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[20] S. Salmonowicz, *Polacy i Niemcy*, pp. 33, 121, 230, 287, 302.

ned, and the definition of relations with the Czechs as "ten centuries of neighbourliness" did not strike roots in the Poles' minds. Both opinions evolved under the influence of changing relations and political situation. The most durable stereotype, the stereotype of the Jew, kept changing too[21].

The Jews were the aliens with regard to whom the attitude of Polish society changed the least in the course of history, though it did undergo some important transformations. The Jews were aliens from the point of view of language, religion and customs. Immigrants from the territories inhabited by the Balts (including the dangerous Pruthenians and Lithuanians) as well as Turkish merchants, Tartar invaders, Armenians and Karamites, let alone the Dutch Mennonites and French Huguenots, were in a similar situation in the dawn of Poland's history. But the Jews played a vital role in the shaping of culture in Old Poland and became an inseparable part of the Polish social landscape. In the first period of Poland's history, up to the end of the 13th century, the Poles associated Jews with finance, trade, banks, usury or minting. Assaults on Jews occurred as early as the 11th century but it seems that they did not differ from attacks on other rich people and, what is more, they occurred much more seldom in Poland than in neighbouring Bohemia or in the distant Rhineland. The Jews were directly subòrdinated to the duke who offered them greater protection than he did to other groups of "aliens". Only in Poland did the privileges granted to the Jews stipulate a penalty for "failing to come to the help of an attacked person" (as was stated in the privilege of 1260). This changed in the 14th century, especially in towns, where Jews competed with rich burghers and were therefore disliked. In the countryside the situation was more complex. The Jews were there a group which enjoyed the landowners' protection; they were a group which stood low in the hierarchy of worth and prestige but was indispensable for the landowners' economy. The functions they performed as leaseholders, customs officers or innkeepers aroused the animosity of peasants. In other words, their negative image was a result of social conflicts rather than of their different religion. It is worth remembering that in the dawn of early modern

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[21] This has been discussed by H. S a m s o n o w i c z, *O "historii prawdziwej"*, pp. 113 ff. Cf. A. C a ł a, *Wizerunek Żyda w polskiej kulturze ludowej (The Image of the Jew in Polish Folk Culture)*, Warszawa 1988, in particular pp. 105 ff.

times the peasants, the most numerous social group, were almost at the bottom of the social hierarchy in Poland's structure. I say "almost" for still lower were not only persons from the margins of society but also the members quickly growing Jewish communities. The peasants seem to have found satisfaction in the feeling that they were better placed than somebody else, than adherents of another non–Catholic religion.

In the 19th century the inflow of Jews from Russia into the Austrian part of Poland and into the Polish Kingdom led to further changes in the attitude to Jews and increased animosity to them also in petty bourgeois circles. In time, attitude to Jews became an important determinant of political opinions. It became a myth–like conviction in the sense that it determined political attitudes and was accepted uncritically and without discussion. Just as the word "papist" was a synonym of "evil" during the Reformation and the "capitalist" personified all the worst human qualities under communism (at least in official propaganda), so for the nationalists the word "Jew" denoted an enemy, and in extreme cases, it was meant to incite hatred. The word was used to rally not only the ideologists of nazism and careerists but also all those who were thwarted in their ambitions, were unhappy for various reasons, all people who were in trouble.

All these remarks concern the significance of myths as a reflection of the state of mind of people who live in specified historical conditions. One could ask whether in more remote times myths were not a more durable factor in people's consciousness, whether the beliefs of the Greeks or Germanic peoples were not a reflection of the original vision of the world that was repeated more or less literally in subsequent centuries. No categorical answer can be given but the theory does not seem to be correct.

There are several reasons why this theory is doubtful. The first is the fact that we come to know the oldest legends through the prism of the time in which they were written. In other words, we do not know whether, and to what extent, their primary versions were changed by those who perpetuated them. The argument that African oral history has been going on for ages is not a very strong argument, for we do not know whether its primary shape has not been changed in the course of time. Another reason for our doubts is the fact that modern (or even contemporary) myths arise and die very quickly. Medieval myths

lasted much longer, but the rate of change in human history was then much slower. The third reason is the content of myths which, as researchers unanimously state, does not reflect the reality of legendary times but of the time when the story was created. Let us add that it is not primary beliefs that frequently lie at the root of myths but scholarly constructions which become myths only when they "come down", become processed and widespread in mass culture. What should also be taken into account is the process, noticed by researchers, of myths losing their mythical qualities. Not every unchecked information about old or even less remote times can be defined as a myth. A legend told to children as a fairy–tale is not a myth. The last reason for our doubts is the state of Polish or even Slavic sources. In the dawn of their history the Slavs were certainly a very primitive people. Their legends, myths and traditions come from much later times. Even if we agree with Henryk Ł o w m i a ń s k i [22] that the legend about the ploughman–ruler originated in the 6th century, this does not change the fact that it did not play a significant part in the Slavic vision of the world. It resembles too much the version about Cincinnatus, who put his plough aside when he was called to rule in Rome; this can denote a much later borrowing. Moreover, the legend has changed too much. In Poland as early as the turn of the 12th century the ploughman turned into a wheelwright and ceased to be the founder of the state. We may lack knowledge, but it seems that it would be difficult to find myths dating from tribal Slavic times. The myths which we know did not arise before the foundation of early states.

All these doubts by no means lessen the value of myths as an historical source, a source abundant in rich diverse contents. The most unquestionable myths reflect the changing conditions which shaped the changing content of myths. And as is the case with all historical phenomena, there is a time when myths arise and the time when they fade away.

(Translated by Janina Dorosz)

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[22] H. Ł o w m i a ń s k i, *Początki Polski (The Beginnings of Poland)*, vol. V, Warszawa 1973, pp. 310 ff.