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The Middle Ages

According to historical sources, the state founded by Mieszko consisted of extensive lands in the Oder and Vistula river basins. Its natural border was formed to the south by the chains of the Carpathian and Sudeten mountains, while to the west the realm ended in the marshy areas of the Oder forests. To the north it stretched to the Baltic Sea, extending along the coast from the mouth of the Oder to that of the Vistula. To the east, the lower Vistula formed a line separating the state from Prussia, while the central course of the Bug and the San river basin, with the Czerwień strongholds, separated it from Kievan Rus. At the core of the state lay the strongholds of Wielkopolska (Great Poland), including Gniezno, the central seat of power. Encompassing some 250,000 km² and with ca. 1 million inhabitants, Mieszko's realm represented the outcome of a decades-long process whereby Slavic tribes had been united by his forebears: his great-grandfather Siemowit, grandfather Lestek, and father Siemomysł. Mieszko drew these lands into the fold of Christian Europe, by adopting Christianity in 966 and instituting state structures modeled after those found there. These achievements would be further consolidated by the most outstanding representative of the Piast dynasty, Bolesław Chrobry (Boleslaus the Brave), who took power upon Mieszko's death in 992. Within a few years thereafter, Bolesław Chrobry had managed to have an archbishopric established in Poznań, directly subordinate to the Apostolic See, plus bishoprics in Kołobrzeg, Wrocław, and Kraków. He was aided in this by the

martyrdom of St. Adalbert (Wojciech) during a mission to Prussia in 997: as a result Poland gained its own martyr, recognized by Rome as a saint. The cult of St. Adalbert was one of the circumstances that set the stage for a conference held in Gniezno in the year 1000, at which Holy Roman Emperor Otto III confirmed the significance of Boleslaw and his state within Christian Europe. It was only in 1025, however, that Boleslaw obtained a crown, thanks to which the Polish ruler joined the ranks of Europe's leading monarchs. Subsequent Polish tradition would remember Boleslaw Chrobry as a symbol of national greatness and ambition, although it is also true that this monarch's ruthless reign – likewise evident in his imposition of Christianity and his embroilment in wars with all of Poland's neighbors, Bohemia, Rus, and the Holy Roman Empire under Henry II – plunged the state into a lasting crisis after his death in 1025. This crisis saw internal revolts, a danger that the state would disintegrate and that the ruling Piast dynasty's power would be undermined, the loss of the crown by Boleslaw's son Mieszko II, and invasions by neighboring states. The Polish state would later be restored, this time with its center of gravity shifted towards Malopolska (Lesser Poland) and Kraków, the new capital of Poland, at the hands of subsequent rulers: Kazimierz Odnowiciel (Casimir the Restorer) and his son Boleslaw II Śmiały (Boleslaus the Bold), crowned king of Poland in 1076. Boleslaw Śmiały soon lost power, however, owing to a dramatic clash with the bishop of Kraków, Stanislaw of Szczepanów, who was denounced by the king, tried and killed in 1079, but who was recognized as a martyr by church and national tradition and would be canonized in 1253. Boleslaw Śmiały was succeeded by his brother Władysław I Herman (Ladislaus Herman), and next by Boleslaw III Krzywousty (Boleslaus the Wry-mouthed), during whose reign the tendencies undermining state unity were successfully averted and Poland's international standing was bolstered, although he did not succeed in regaining the crown. Owing to an act of succession that parceled out power among his five sons, Boleslaw III's death ushered in an almost 200-year period known in Polish history as the time of "regional fragmentation." This was an age fraught with conflict and struggles to secure control over the senior Kraków province, which oftentimes gave merely an illusion of primacy over the remaining prin-

cipalities. Noteworthy among events of international significance was the appearance of the German Order of the Hospital of the Virgin Mary (the Teutonic Knights) on Poland's northeastern frontiers in 1226, invited in by Prince Konrad Mazowiecki (Conrad of Masovia) for the mission of Christianizing the Prussians. The Knights would eventually come to occupy all of Pomorze (Pomerania), and out of the Prussian lands they conquered they set up a powerful state that threatened both Poland and Lithuania. Another important event was Poland's and Europe's encounter with the Tatars, who first conquered Kievan Rus and then advanced all the way to Central Europe, crushing the Christian knights led by the Silesian Prince Henryk Pobożny (Henry the Pious) at the battle of Legnica (1241). Despite the wane in Poland's role as a state during the time of regional fragmentation, this period did also bring fundamental social and cultural transformations that served to unite the Polish lands with Europe – via the princes' courts, which harbored great political and cultural ambitions, and via the activities of the Church, especially of the newly-founded Franciscan and Dominican orders. Repeated attempts at politically reunifying the state would only be successful for Władysław Łokietek (Ladislaus the Elbow-High), prince of Kujawy, who was crowned King of Poland in 1320. The country returned to its former glory under his son, Kazimierz Wielki (Casimir the Great), the last monarch in the Piast dynasty. The Poland Kazimierz Wielki left behind was a strong political and economic entity, of primary importance in this part of Europe. Following his death (1370), the succession fell to his nephew, the Hungarian King Louis d'Anjou, and next to the latter's underage daughter Jadwiga. The magnates of Malopolska deemed the pagan ruler of Lithuania to be a suitable husband for her. After his acceptance of baptism, which thus Christianized Lithuania, he became king of Poland (1386) as Władysław II Jagiello, and founder of the new Jagiellonian dynasty. This Christianization of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian bond tipped the balance of political forces in this eastern part of Europe, due to the quite rapid emergence of a powerful Polish-Lithuanian state, encompassing vast areas of Poland, Lithuania, and Lithuanian-held Ruthenia, and commanding great economic and military potential. Władysław Jagiello scored a military and political success in his war

against the Teutonic Order, sealed at the great Battle of Grunwald in 1410, thanks to which the aggressive expansion of the Order was curbed. After his death in 1534, the throne fell to his eldest son Władysław Wareńczyk (Ladislaus of Varna), who was also appointed king of Hungary. While fighting in Pope Eugene IV's crusade against the Turks, Władysław died at the battle of Varna (1444). He was succeeded on the throne in Kraków by Kazimierz Jagiellończyk (Casimir the Jagiellonian), whose nearly half-century of reign constituted a golden age of the Polish medieval period. Kazimierz also enjoyed political success in his victory over the Teutonic Order, thanks to which a part of Prussia including the mouth of the Vistula, called Royal Prussia, was incorporated into the lands of the Polish Crown, while the remainder became a Polish fiefdom. These times left a lasting mark upon the history of culture, whose development was closely tied to the University in Kraków – an institution that had been functioning since the days of Kazimierz Wielki, and was recognized in the second half of the 15th century as one of the most prominent learning institutions in Europe.

I. Poland and Christian Europe

Poland's adoption of Christianity in 966 marks the most important event in the history of the modern Polish state and Polish culture. It was then that Prince Mieszko, from the Piast dynasty of Wielkopolska, drew Poland into the Christian world. Gradually, at first encountering the kind of difficulties naturally entailed by the clash of two cultures (pagan Slavic vs. western Christian culture), but subsequently at an increasing pace, the Piast state permeated Christian Europe and became part of it. This is how history begins. Five centuries later, towards the end of the Middle Ages, the Kingdom of Poland would be a powerful European country, extending all the way into the territory of Orthodox Rus, and through its personal union with the newly Christianized Lithuania, Jagiellonian Poland would itself become a nexus of European cultural expansion to the east.

Opening up an avenue to Europe, meant at the same time opening up an avenue to Poland for Europe. Mieszko's state became fused

into the Christian world region, and Europe, via its representatives (clergymen and monks), entered Poland's territory; in addition to their faith they brought the achievements of modern civilization: a universal language, writing and art, which enabled not just the absorption, but also the material consolidation of culture. Through them, a kind of imitation of the mature Christian world, a mirror image, developed here, in this young world they were taming for their own purposes. Slowly, however, within this reflected or imitation landscape certain prominent works did begin to stand out; they started to illuminate the landscape with their own sort of light, a light drawn from the source of the specific nature of national history, or from the specific value of the works themselves, i.e. their uniqueness for Polish and European literature.

II. The Past Chronicles: Gallus and Vincent

The first great literary work would arrive only after a wait of 150 years. During the reign of Bolesław Krzywousty, in 1113-1117, a work was written that would later be called the *Polish Chronicle* (*Kronika polska*). Its author's name is unknown, but he was a Benedictine friar educated in France, who had probably also spent time in Hungary. In the 16th century the historian Marcin Kromer dubbed him "Gallus Anonymous," and it is by this name that he remains known today in Polish literature, as the country's first chronicler and historian – although it would be more apt to speak of him as a historical writer. Gallus' work was not a chronicle in the full sense of the word, but rather a description of the life and deeds of Prince Bolesław. Thus it would be more apt to describe it using the European literary term "*gesta*," which the author himself frequently employed, referring to his task as portraying the Polish ruler's deeds: Bolesław was to be the hero, and his deeds were to be extolled by Gallus' pen.

Gallus Anonymous' *gesta* consist of three volumes. The first offers a kind of extensive introduction, in which the author intended to describe the memorable deeds of Prince Bolesław's forebears, leading up until the moment the hero himself is conceived at the intercession of St. Giles. The second volume speaks of the prince's youth, his

first victories as an independent ruler prior to 1109, chiefly his campaign against the Pomeranians. The third volume relates Bolesław's deeds during the four years leading up to 1113.

The compositional structure of the work is much more complex. Each volume is preceded by the author's letters and poetic summaries (epilogues) of the contents to follow, and each contains one hymn. The first contains the 30-line *Lament at the Death of Bolesław the Brave* (*Żal po śmierci Bolesława Chrobrego*), a *planctus* sung by widowed Poland, the second a *cantelina* sung by knights conquering Pomerania, and the third a song sung by German knights about the intrepid leader Bolesław. The artistry of the work's construction is coupled with the artistry of its prose style, frequently rhymed in accordance with the prevailing *ars dictandi* of the day.

Gallus' artistic diligence and stylistic skillfulness manifest links to French models of the historical epic, and at the same time blend with the way the author consciously portrays himself as an artist with the power to preserve the deeds and glory of his protagonists. Through the author, the hero – a prince reigning on the fringes of Christian Europe – approaches immortality, much like the knights and kings of the historical medieval epoch. The schemas of secular and hagiographic biography, which undoubtedly inform this image, when filled with Polish substance gain a freshness befitting this new and literarily virginal world. Gallus Anonymous' *gesta* have the advantage of being this world's first initiation, marking a rite of passage in Polish literature. They bring the first hero, the first versified tests about Polish reality, the first hymn about the state and fatherland, which is referred to with the Latin word *patria*. The initial chapters of the first volume even provide something more: a history of this fatherland, a closer look at kings and princes that are known from other written documents, but yet even a bit more than this – history as preserved in legends about the Piast dynasty.

During the course of the 12th century, the state experienced a definite eastward shift, and Kraków, the capital of the senior province, became the chief center of the fragmented country. It was here, too, in the heart of Małopolska, that the second Polish chronicle, perhaps the greatest literary work of the Polish Middle Ages, was

written. Its author was Master Vincent, latter called Kadłubek, an enlightened individual who had been educated in France. He penned his work in the years 1190-1205, presumably at the request of Prince Kazimierz II Sprawiedliwy (Casimir the Just). Unlike Gallus' work, Vincent's interest is focused upon the state itself – the *res publica* – or upon the history of the nation. This perspective of state and nation, predominant in Vincent's *Chronicle*, enable us to comprehend his attempt at reconstructing a specifically Polish mythology, weaving the Poles of antiquity into history at large. Hence his tales of the Dacians and Gauls, of a certain Gracchus (Krak) who founded the state, of Wanda, the Lekhs, and Alexander the Great, of Lestek and Julia – Julius Caesar's sister. Superimposed thereupon is the cycle of Piast legends familiar from Gallus Anonymous' *Chronicles*, which enable the work to make a seamless transition into the history of Poland, starting with Mieszko I and leading through the first years of the 13th century.

In setting forth such a vision of the state, stretching back into the farthest reaches of antiquity, what Vincent produced was neither a history, nor a saga of the Piast line as Gallus Anonymous had written. Rather, his work is a historical treatise with a moral agenda espousing the need for order, law, justice, and order-abiding virtues on the part of rulers and citizens. This is why Gracchus, the legendary founder of Kraków and likewise the source of the law in force in these lands, is such an important figure. Kings and princes are judged from this standpoint. A clearly parenetic aim inspired the fourth volume's portrayal of Prince Kazimierz II Sprawiedliwy, the writer's protector and perhaps the inspirer of the work itself.

While viewing Vincent's *Chronicle* as a historico-moral treatise, we call attention to its literary form: the firework display of the author's artistry. The first three volumes are written as a dialog between two church dignitaries, a format that facilitates erudite deliberation of various points of view, and layered excursions and commentaries. The fourth volume, written more dynamically and with a publicist's devotion to current affairs, presents the period Vincent himself knew firsthand: the power struggles over the senior Kraków throne. Both the dialog and the narrative are embellished with poetic

interpolations, either drawn from classical poetry – here the author proves himself to be exceptionally erudite – or representing original compositions. Vincent’s work thus contains the psalm, the panegyric, as well as lesser forms: the song and the fable, as well as an extensive versified dialog between anthropomorphized concepts, incorporated into the last volume – a kind of allegoric poem of encoded political content, referring to the situation that ensued after Prince Kazimierz’s death. The vagueness of the dialog’s message is at the same time just one of many examples of the use of the northern French style of “difficult ornamentation,” which preferred roundabout phrasings, difficult and refined *tropes* and rhetorical figures. Vincent’s erudition, style, the nature of his examples and the elements of his moral message all enable us to pinpoint quite precisely the kind of works and authors the Polish writer drew upon, and among which his *Polish Chronicle* should be placed on the library shelf. This is a shelf richly stocked with works by the masters of Chartres, manuscripts by such authorities as John of Salisbury, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and Alan of Lille, and tomes by the Cistercians, especially St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who were the most akin to Vincent.

III. The Chivalrous Epic: *The Hymn of Maurus*

The works of Gallus Anonymous and Master Vincent are not the only texts that lead us to relate 12th-century Polish writing to French pre-Renaissance culture, then dominant in Europe. A certain epic poem in Latin, dealing with the tragic fate of Piotr Włostowic (d. 1153), Wrocław’s *comes palatinus* from the house of Łabędź, a vassal of Prince Władysław Wygnaniec (Ladislaus the Exile), was still extant and being read as late as in the first half of the 16th century. In this poem, the knight is wrongly accused of treason by the prince’s wife and cruelly punished. The original story, whose roots lie in the power struggle that took place after Bolesław Krzywousty’s death, was fashioned into a chivalrous epic story by the monk Maurus from the Benedictine monastery in Wrocław. Unfortunately the original has not survived, and its 16th-century reworking into prose can only attest to the former existence of chivalrous epics, a genre so

sorely lacking in our modern-day picture of Polish medieval literature. As a curiosity, we can note a reconstruction attempted in the 20th century by R. Ganszyniec, based on preserved fragments and summaries. Also worthy of note is the tradition of this medieval story, further cultivated in later centuries.

IV. A Pole's Journey from Rome to the Tatars

On the fringes of medieval historiography there is one more work that does not belong to history-writing *per se*, and constitutes an entirely unique phenomenon in the Polish Middle Ages. In the mid-13th century (1245-1247), Pope Innocent IV's great legation to the Tatar Khan included a Franciscan from Wrocław known as Benedict the Pole. We owe two of the three accounts of this journey to this friar. One of them was taken down in Cologne on the basis of his oral account, while the other, entitled *Historia Tartarorum* (*History of the Tatars*), the friar penned himself. This travelogue includes one part devoted to the history of the Tatar state, plus another, geographical-ethnographic portion, more closely tied to the traveler's experiences and teeming with extremely interesting descriptions of the prevailing customs in a world that was foreign to the culture of Western Europe. This is an important work that anticipates later travelogues and fascination with the orient.

V. Saints

The most extensive avenue of exchange between the young state of the Piasts and the wider Christian world was their common faith, as confirmed by the commonly recognized saints of the Church. This was why so much import was vested in the cult of St. Wojciech (Adalbert), which developed beginning in the 10th century. St. Wojciech was considered a saint of Piast-ruled Poland – even though he himself had been a Czech, and his first biographer, Bruno of Querfurt, a German. *The Life of St. Adalbert*, traditionally viewed as marking the outset of literature in the Polish lands, was accompanied by *The Life of Five Martyred Brothers* and *The Life of St. Zoeradus* (Świerad).

A true age of hagiography came in the 13th century, proliferating the cult of Stanisław of Szczepanów (d. 1079, canonized 200 years later). The list of domestic saints and beatified individuals grew longer: Jadwiga (Hedwiga), the wife of Silesian Prince Henry the Bearded; Kinga (Cunegundes) the wife of Boleslaus the Shameful, his sister Salomea, and the Dominican friar Jacek (Hyacinth) Odrowąż. The hagiographic works that retold their life stories rose to the rank of an important phenomenon in Polish culture and literature, in a way analogous to the situation throughout Europe. Names of authors began to appear, among which we should highlight Vincent of Kielcza, the author of *The Life of St. Stanislaus* and also the hymn *Gaude, mater Polonia*.

VI. First texts written in Polish

Latin, the language of all known works of early Polish medieval literature, long reigned supreme as the written idiom. The first sentences written in the Polish language only appeared in documents from the 13th century. And it is from the end of the same century, or the outset of the next, that the Polish sermons called the *Holy Cross Sermons* (*Kazania mi świętokrzyskimi*) date. A 14th-century parchment copy of this work was discovered to have been preserved in strips of binding material that was subsequently used by a 15th-century bookbinder to reinforce the cover of a theological code of little import today. The strips of parchment extracted from this binding now represent one of the greatest treasures of Polish literature, containing extensive fragments of the oldest work written in the Polish language. They consist of five fragments of sermons, and one complete sermon for St. Catherine's day. Their most astounding aspect, however, lies in the conclusions to be drawn from an analysis of their content, theological message, argumentation, style, and language. These sermons turn out not to have been intended for the commoners of a simple parish. Rather, they attest to intellectual and artistic maturity on the part of both their author and their intended listeners, who were able to appreciate the preacher's level and skill. This presumably demonstrates that within the circle of secular courtiers, or per-

haps within the female cloisters associated with the powerful elite, a community of individuals had already then emerged that required Polish texts displaying a high caliber of organized thought and language. The *Holy Cross Sermons* thus shatter the simple scheme which envisions Latin as having been the language of the elite, while Polish was the language of simple parishioners.

VII. The *Bogurodzica*

This simple scheme is likewise incongruous with another work that arose at approximately the same time, i.e. at the turn of the 13th and 14th centuries: the first religious hymn written in Polish, the *Bogurodzica* (a title which means “she who gave birth to God”). The two oldest attestations of this song date from the beginning of the 15th century, when it was written down in manuscripts that come from two different locations, near Gniezno and Kraków, attesting that the hymn was popular in those times. This popularity is further confirmed by several more attestations from the second half of the 15th century and from the 16th century, by its printing in the *Statutes* of Jan Łaski from 1506, as well as by a fact recorded in Jan Długosz’s *Chronicle* that it had been sung by Polish knights at the Battle of Grunwald in 1410. The hymn changed shape over the course of these two centuries, and the number of stanzas grew as new parts of various provenance were added. The original, archaic portion of the *Bogurodzica* consists of two stanzas. This is the form it displays in one of the oldest above attestations, where soon after 1407 the song was noted down together with musical notation on the end paper of a volume of Latin sermons.

Research on the *Bogurodzica* has revealed its exceptional artistry. Its stanzaic form indicates that it arose as a *trope* on the acclamation *Kyrie eleison*. What is probably most important, however, is the assertion that the work is wholly original. No Latin source has been uncovered, a fact that is even more noteworthy since the hymn demonstrates an almost perfect formal structure, a cohesive construction evincing the author’s exceptional sense of beauty, manifest in its perfect symmetry and veritably mathematical precision.

The work's symmetrical structure, almost faultless rhymes, and parallelisms underscored by rhyme draw our attention to its perfection of form, the perfection of this appeal addressed to Mary and via her intercession to Christ, the Son and God. A detailed analysis of this prayer, wherein an entreaty is first made of the Mother of God, while the second stanza speaks of the intercession of John the Baptist, allows us to discern the schema of the iconographic theme of *deesis* (Greek for "entreaty" or "prayer"), cultivated in Byzantine culture and assimilated by the culture of Roman Europe in the 11th-13th centuries. In *deesis*, as in our prayer, the central figure is Christ the Majesty, with Mary standing on the right and St. John the Baptist on the left.

The *Bogurodzica* is undoubtedly the greatest artistic achievement in Piast-epoch Polish literature. Its very appearance, the fact that a work of this sort was written in the national language, opens up a new chapter in the Polish Middle Ages, an epoch Henryk Samsonowicz, the Polish historian, has dubbed the "golden autumn" of medieval Poland.

VIII. The Jagiellonian period

Studies of later Polish medieval literature require different methods than the earlier period. The end of the 14th century, and especially the 15th century with its flowering of Polish culture under the Jagiellonians, gave rise to copious works that now encompassed all dimensions of social affairs (political and occasional literature, publicist commentary, chronicle-keeping) and spiritual life (eschatological verses, religious songs), written in both Latin and Polish.

Over the course of the four centuries that had transpired since Mieszko I's adoption of Christianity, fundamental changes had taken place within the sphere of the state. When the Piast dynasty came to its end, the realm of Kazimierz Wielki comprised an internally close-knit entity with a solid economic foundation and great political significance, which maintained clear sovereignty with respect to the two chief authorities of the Western Christian world. Due to the connection with the house of Anjou and then the Jagiellonians' expansion in

Central Europe, Kraków became one of the centers of the Christian world – in 1364, the second university in this part of Europe (after Charles University in Prague) was set up in the city. In the 15th century, the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland, combined by personal union with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, became a power capable of influencing the fate of Europe.

Keeping pace with historical events, literature furthered the rich tradition of chronicle-writing. Successive works appeared: the chronicle of Dzierżwa from the beginning of the 14th century, the chronicle of Janko of Czarnków from the end of the same century, and finally the monumental *Annals or Chronicles of the Glorious Polish State (Annales seu cronicae incliti Regni Poloniae)* by Jan Długosz (1415-1480). Although these chronicles are modern in their own way – adhering to the annals format, they aspire to treat sources critically and attempt to follow the example set by Livy – it is nevertheless hard to view them as a work of literature, and they do not live up to the 13th-century chronicles in this respect.

IX. History and Literature

One novelty that appeared in Polish literature of the late medieval period was a considerable number of poetic works inspired by historical events. Foremost among these is a 14th-century Latin hymn, *De quodam advocatione Cracoviensi Alberto*, about an unsuccessful revolt by the Kraków leader Albert, bloodily repressed by Władysław Łokietek; next in line are poems about the victorious battle against the Teutonic Knights at Grunwald, and about the demise of King Władysław at Varna in 1444. Latin, as usual, surpasses Polish. A whole host of poets now appeared, working in hexameter in imitation of Virgil and writing occasional and panegyric literature. Worthy of note is the funerary poetry, such as the splendid epitaph to the knight Zawisza Czarny written by Adam Świnka, or an anonymous poem written in memory of Andrzej Odrowąż. Within the circle of Władysław Jagiełło's court, a song in praise of Kraków was written by Stanisław Ciołek. The royal court, the Kraków Academy, and the courts of church dignitaries, places that brought together concentra-

tions of educated individuals, become receptive to literary novelties emanating from 15th-century Italy. It was also natural that these elites, as yet not fully recognized, could appreciate the dialog that was written in the wake of chancellor Zbigniew Oleśnicki's death in the middle of the century, which can be considered the first work written in an already Renaissance style.

Where history and literature intersected, certain works written in the Polish language did rarely appear. They are all the more noteworthy since they bear traces of the Hussite movement, filtering in from the Czech lands. Hussitism did not encounter any resonance in Poland to correspond to the dynamic movement it set in motion in the homeland of Jan Hus, who was burnt at the stake in 1415. Attempts to undertake more extensive action were suppressed by armed force in 1439. One very interesting figure in this regard was Jędrzej Gałka of Dobczyn, a "master" of the University in Kraków, who was accused of harboring Hussite sympathies and popularizing the works of John Wycliffe, the intellectual patron of Hussitism. Among the writings of Jędrzej, who saved his skin by fleeing to Silesia, is *Pieśń o Wyclifie* (*Song on Wycliffe*), an apology of the English philosopher, containing an exposition of his teachings, set to a popular melody. The most interesting aspect of this small work of propaganda is its attempt at communicating the precise philosophical terminology of Wycliffe's works in simple Polish language – quite possibly the first attempt of this sort in Polish literature.

While mentioning *Song of Wycliffe*, we should point out the custom of writing verses in Polish that referred to current affairs and events, set to melodies and intended to be popularly sung and circulated. We can only surmise that many such works were written, and that the ones we are nowadays familiar with represent but a coincidentally preserved vestige – such as the *Song on the Assassination of Andrzej Tęczyński* (*Pieśń o zabiciu Andrzeja Tęczyńskiego*), which tells the tale of a nobleman beheaded by Kraków burghers, and the severe punishment meted out as a result. We should presumably treat poems of manners, a mere sample of which is provided by the verses of a certain Słota about what table manners should be observed during feasts, as likewise representing fragments of the same body of popular songs.

X. “New” religious hymns and Władysław of Gielnów

The most interesting, most valuable and artistic, and most mature works of late medieval Polish literature were written in the realm of religious poetry. Hymns were written in the 14th and 15th centuries, most frequently by fashioning tropes around fixed fragments of liturgy, which like the *Bogurodzica* gained popularity as church calendar songs. The resurrection hymn *For Us God’s Son Rose From the Dead* (*Nas dla wstał z martwych Syn Boży*) was recorded as a continuation of the *Bogurodzica*. Most of the hymns are translations of Latin tropes, such as *Christ from the Dead is Risen* (*Krystus zmartwych wstał je*), *A Joyful Day Has Come Unto Us* (*Wesoły nam dzień nastal*), or hymns such as *Oh Holy Cross, Be Praised* (*O krzyżu naświetszy, bądź pozdrowion*). From the perspective of the subsequent history of the religious hymn, we should note the songs intended for the occasion of Christmas, which later (as early as in the 17th century) grew into popular carols. The oldest preserved carol is considered to be song *Be Hailed, King of Angels* (*Zdrów bądź, królu anjelski*), known from a copy from 1424. The Christmas carol *The Angel Said Unto the Shepherds* (*Anioł pasterzom mowił*), still sung to this day, also dates back to the 15th century.

The most intriguing phenomenon against this backdrop is that of extra-liturgical poetry, which grew out the fervent religiosity cultivated by monastic circles. The role of inspirer and moderator in this regard is chiefly ascribed to reformed Franciscan monasteries. After being reformed according to the principle of St. Bernardine of Siena, the order officially abolished the appellation “Observants,” and in Poland they came to be called “Bernardines.” Thanks to this order, there appear new depictions of the old hymn themes, new interpretations of the Passion that particularly highlight the motif of Mary’s “compassion” (*compassio*), new analyses of the Nativity that assimilate and expand upon apocryphal motifs. This body of works gains in significance when read in the context of the Italian “lauds”, the Franciscan hymns of such outstanding poets as Jacopone da Todi and Bianco da Siena.

One such Bernardine friar was Władysław of Gielniów (ca. 1440-1505), the first Polish poet writing in the Polish language whom we

can identify by name, and whose *oeuvre* we can successfully pin down today. In his quite abundant, albeit scattered legacy, we can clearly discern the dominance of new topics and new interpretations. The motif of Mary's compassion is clearly manifest in the Passion hymn *Judas Sold Jesus for Paltry Money* (*Jezusa Judasz sprzedał za pieniądze nędzne*), while the hymn *When Augustus Was Caesar* (*Augustus kiedy królował*) is undoubtedly an example of a new construal of the Bethlehem story. The verses of Władysław of Gielniów and certain other anonymous 15th-century songs preserved in hymn books comprise a clear corpus of religious poems that are termed "new hymns," which are characterized by a type of late medieval religiousness and spirituality, yet also contribute to forming a certain model of religious culture – encompassing topics, motifs, symbolism, and phraseology – that would long remain alive in old Polish culture.

XI. Lament of the Mother of God at the Foot of the Cross

Among such "new hymns," the most outstanding work of medieval Polish lyric poetry, known as *Holy Cross Lament* or *Lament of the Mother of God at the Foot of the Cross* (*Lament świętokrzyski* or *Żale Matki Boskiej pod krzyżem*), makes for probably the best reading. It belongs among the "*planctus*" genre (Latin for "lament"), then widespread in Europe – the most famous of which is Jacopone da Todi's Latin sequence *Stabat Mater dolorosa*, which presents a scene, couched in lyric monolog, of the Mother beneath the cross, mourning the death of her Son. The Polish lament is a wholly original work, even though it is woven of a fabric of themes known from the apocryphal tradition, motifs conventionally affiliated with the *planctus* genre. Its novelty lies in the fact that it presents a dramatic frame (a kind of theatrical prologue), that seemingly draws the reader (listener) into the Golgotha scene. The lament proper, which begins only from the third stanza onward, is a true display of the nameless poet's artistic skill. The subsequent five stanzas of the monolog pivot around a central stanza, expressing in several simple sentences the Mother's inability to give assistance to her Son, as he hangs too far above her. All the tragedy and pain are concentrated in this simplicity and help-

lessness. The preceding and succeeding stanzas seemingly encircle the central pivot. They address the theme of watching suffering (stanzas 3 and 7) and of wounded motherhood (stanzas 4 and 6), and are woven of themes that are well-known, but reworked in an intensified and subtle interpretation. The artistry of the song thus manifests itself on the one hand in the exceptional emotional intensity of Mary's monolog, which is concise and devoid of any superfluous words, and on the other in the subtle portrayal and analysis of the Mother's tragedy, experienced in the here-and-now but yet augured in the past, a tragedy that plays out in the divine dimension, but yet is experienced in the human one.

XII. Apocryphal narratives

The apocryphal themes of religious hymns point us towards one more important sphere of medieval writing in Poland, i.e. longer "histories" describing the life of Jesus and his agony, written in prose. These are compiled works, which draw upon various Latin sources popular during the epoch, but also rest on the groundwork of earlier stories based on the gospels and apocrypha. This type of work, described as apocryphal or apocryphally-themed literature, is chiefly represented by two voluminous works that have come to be called "meditations." The first is entitled *Meditations on the Life of Jesus* (*Rozmyślanie o żywocie Pana Jezusa*) or *Przemysł Meditations* (*Rozmyślanie przemyskie*) after where the manuscript was found, while the second come to be called *Dominican Meditations* (*Rozmyślanie dominikańskie*) after their presumed place of origin, at the Kraków monastery of the Dominicans. The *Przemysł Meditations*, which unfortunately lack both a beginning and an end, encompass the entire gospel story from the heralding to Anna of Christ's birth, all the way until the torment, where it breaks off at the scene of Christ's conversation with Pilate. The story is divided into volumes, and further subdivided into small "celebrations" corresponding to individual biographical episodes taken from Latin models. The *Dominican Meditations*, on the other hand, are of a different nature, recorded in a manuscript decorated with miniatures that comprise a graphic cycle

running in parallel to the narration. The story here concentrates only on the Passion. Despite their likewise compiled nature, one can clearly discern within these meditations a method of relating Jesus' torment that is specific to the late medieval period. By relying on naturalism and detailed descriptive passages, this method speaks to the sensory imagination of the reader and listener, by stressing the physical suffering it refers to the Dolorism typical of the time, and by stressing the role of Mary and her compassion it appeals to contemplative spirituality and religiousness – the very same that produced *The Lament of the Mother of God at the Foot of the Cross*.

XIII. The persistence of the Middle Ages

One characteristic aspect of medieval culture and literature in Poland is that it did not come to an end in tandem with the close of the 15th century and the emergence of the new, humanistic movement. European medieval literature continued to be reprocessed, and would provide inspiration for the egalitarian culture of Renaissance times. Two editions of the *Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (*Żywota Pana Jezusa Krysta*) composed by Baltazar Opec on the basis of the 14th-century *Meditationes vitae Christi* ascribed to St. Bonaventure, appeared in print in 1522. Various types of “histories” with sources in medieval tales of the *Gesta Romanorum* type were printed. Only in the 16th century did the morality play appear in its full glory, while the first Polish medieval Passion play, *The History of the Glorious Resurrection of Our Lord* (*Historyja o chwalebnyim zmartwychwstaniu Pańskim*) written by Mikołaj from Wilkowiecko, a Paulite friar from Częstochowa, appeared in print in the 1680s. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that we still discern a clear echo of the medieval tradition in the religious poets of the early 17th century, such as Stanisław Grochowski or Kasper Miaskowski.

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