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PROBLEMS WITH EDITING AND TRANSLATING HISTORICAL SOURCES. SOME POLISH EXAMPLES

Abstract: Paper presents a new attitude to the issue of medieval editions of Latin written records and focuses on the importance of their publication in the form as close to the original version and its contents as possible. It also deals with some misunderstandings resulting from overinterpretation of sources which have not been carefully published and subsequently translated.

Keywords: chronicles, historical sources, editions, historical critics, translations

Introduction

Professional history differs from other historical narratives because it is based on the study of historical sources. So the initial issue of historical methodology remains a matter of the material from which the historian draws his/her knowledge that is historical sources. This basic historical procedure is called historical heuristics. The rules of historical heuristics consist in collecting historical sources on the topic we want to explore and to read works of the historians who were dealing with the topic. The historian working on the sources is usually using critical editions of the texts of the sources and their translations into modern languages as the first interpretation of their text. As such, a translation, to a certain extent, is representing the source and to some extent its historical interpretation.

Both in the case of using an edition of the text and its translation, the manuscript copies on which they are based remain the most crucial problem. From the point of view of the historian some difficulties arise here. Critical editions are usually prepared in accordance with preserved manuscript copies of the text. The text that is prepared on this basis, unless it is based on one manuscript, is an artificial creation. We do not have any data proving that the source text ever existed in the form made up by the editor.

It is important for source criticism that the edited text preserves such features of its manuscript form as uppercase and lowercase letters, errors, misspelling of proper names punctuation and so on. Usually editor has to choose which features of the manuscript should be preserved in the edition.

And this applies not only to the ancient and medieval historical sources. This happens even when the sources are most recent: when editors in accordance with the official rules of text editing, not only improve spelling or punctuation, but even the forms of writing dates, thus changing edited text in order to meet the rules of modern orthography.

Beginnings of the historical chronology is usually referred to the end of eighteenth century, the principles of editing the text were developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Developing of these kinds of knowledge created history as an academic discipline[1].

Historical methodology ultimately reached its full form just before the First World War. This does not mean that by then the academic history developed all its possible research methods. New technologies greatly influenced the ways in which historians are dealing with their topics. Not only that. There appeared some new ideas as well. Development of research techniques led to the creation of Historical Source Studies (Polish: Źródłoznawstwo), as a separate field of historical research[2]. This allowed, at least potentially, the verification of the existing research on sources already beyond historical methodology. Assessing the so-called auxiliary sciences of history from the perspective of Historical Source Studies, one can say that diplomatics reached the level of the independent Historical Source Study in the late nineteenth century. These achievements led to the separation of Historical Source Studies approach.

How it is connected with the historical heuristics and the problems of the sources we use in historical analysis? Let's start with classifications of historical sources. The one proposed by Polish historian Gerard Labuda did not rely on the separation of certain categories of objects relating

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[1] Gierl 2012.
[2] Kürbis 2007.

to specific artifacts[3]. Labuda, as shown in another place, divided historical sources, according to a cognitive perspective of the investigating historian. According to this division the same artifacts, depending on the historian's viewpoint, could be placed in different categories of sources.

This changing perspective of historical research directed towards historical reconstruction requires from the publisher of historical source something else than from philologists-editors. Such division of the publishers is indeed artificial because both kind of editors – historians and philologists – usually go far beyond the patterns of their fields when editing their texts. However, wrong ideas are still present and, what's more, there are official sets of editing rules put onto publishers' efforts.

New research techniques are often specialized domains, discussed in narrow clusters and in different parts of the globe. Additional difficulty is the problem of the application of new techniques. They often arise on the basis of various intellectual fashions. The latter are founded on mythologies of philosophically aimed principles that free us from the obligation of individual interpretation, trusting turnkey solutions. This applies not only to Marxism, but also to structuralism, post-modernism, or historical anthropology (whatever those terms mean for historians who apply them). Some would maintain that knowledge about the state of researches in the field concerning the research technique is a fiction. This is due to the lack of discussion in the field where they could meet representatives of various intellectual currents in humanities. The field for the time being cannot arise at wish – any discussion requires some common base, which has not as yet been developed. A proposal in this direction is the book by Ewa Domańska but there is also resistance against such attempts[4].

Let us try to identify ourselves a framework around which the techniques of historical research in the field of research of the sources would need to be built.

If the text of the source is treated as a sign, we can distinguish icons, indices and symbols. Icons and symbols are in our case pictures and texts. On the basis of Historical Source Studies we have here iconography and textology – divided for the analysis into levels comprising phonetics, syntax and narrative / or as it is called the great semantic figures (Janusz Sławiński[5]). Iconography is dealing with all sources where at least a part of the message is expressed by image and color.

Indices are reference marks. On the basis of history we can find them by an analysis of keywords – used by the historians-anthropologists, researchers in gender studies etc. The editing of the historical sources, however, refers to another earlier baseline level of analysis. This was already indicated by Brigida Kürbis' idea of Historical Source Studies

– as an approach to the source, which considers them as a historical fact. This approach should be also the starting point for editions of the historical sources.

The closest to this approach is archeology and the idea of historical sources as artifacts as described by Krzysztof Maciej Kowalski[6]. Editing of the sources must come from similar overall objectives of treating a source as a historical fact. This approach causes some practical problems. Such studies require e.g. large financial resources. The trend, as is well known, is however different. If for practical reasons it is not possible to incorporate these principles into life in its entirety (though I do not understand the scientific basis of this argument), then what is the most important thing to do? What should be included in editions of the source or their translations?

Let us use here the term *distinctive features* as used by linguists. These are the characteristics of the message that are relevant for its understanding and interpretation. E.g. the length and shortness of syllables, or tones – can in some languages change not only the pronunciation but also the meaning of the speech. Such *distinctive features* of the source should therefore be retained in the edited text, that are taken into account in the process of historical reconstruction.

So we should name here: spelling, punctuation, the so-called language errors treated as writer's individual traits that allow us to distinguish his/her texts from the others.

It would facilitate checking the outcome of historical criticism concerning both the authenticity and the credibility of those texts. Translations of philosophical or literary texts sometimes try to walk on this path.

A source as meant by historical sciences is something individual, i.e. associated with the historic moment of its creation and usage. However, as a message source refers to a semiotic language by which its encoded. The very idea of the communication process allows us to treat a historical source as a massage of a real person directed towards the others in a historically discernible moment. We can understand what we call historical source as a historical fact understood as a multi-storey complex creation.

For the purposes of discussion, however, it is better to concentrate on the singularity of the communication act and on less complicated aspects of the form of the source. So we can take e.g. individual coat of arms, which is the realization of some more general assumptions from a local perspective. In reality it is always a local source that we are dealing with, although it cannot be understood without a wider approach. Establishing this wider social perspective, for example the languages of the pictures or narrative schema or situational ones etc., requires recognizing, as the starting point, these particular and accidental treats of the messages we call historical sources and which should appear in the historical edition.

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[3] Labuda 2010.
[4] Domańska 2012.
[5] Sławiński 1988; Solviche 2014.

[6] Kowalski 1996; Kowalski 2013.

If I had suggested to the specialists in diplomatics and medieval chronology the unification of the form of recorded date of the document edited in a diplomatic codex, or had written that the seal or inscription is not a historical source, it would be enough to eliminate me from among the medievalists. Meanwhile, it is a case study of modern history, where officially accepted rules of publishing texts of the sources lead almost to the falsification of their edition.

So here we have the problem of the coverage by a historical methodology of all the periods examined by historians. The professionalization of these studies would rationalize public debate on the history. Recent history is important for our functioning both at internal and external history of Europe.

However, the historical reconstruction depends on the research technique, which must incorporate not only new themes, but also combine and validate the methods used so far with new ones. How does such study look, we can see on the example of some analysis of the sources concerning the first Polish historical rulers, Mieszko and Bolesław Chrobry.

Translation problems

Preserved only in late copies, we have the text of the epitaph of Boleslaw Chrobry, the first king of Poland. Two verses of the text we are to deal with run as follows:

4. Precidens comam septennii tempore Romam,
5. Tu possedisti velut verus athleta Christi[7]

Trimming hair in the seventh year (time), Rome
You acquired like a real fighter of Christ

But usually the first line is translated in another way:
In the seventh year you trimmed hair to send them to Rome

Why? Because of the phrase *Romam Tu possedisti* – which means – *Rome You acquired*. The literary meaning of the words may be interpreted in such a way that the Polish king captured Rome. It is of course not true. But we can also read the whole statement allegorically – Rome being equivalent to the highest achievement of the warrior of Christ who being baptized became truly Roman citizen.

The error in the example was made due to the tendency to read the text literally. Thus constructed meaning was contradictory with historical knowledge so it was changed even against the preserved text of the epitaph. As a result historians were writing about nice medieval custom consisting in sending the cut hair of king's son to the pope.

Our next example is taken from the text of the oldest Polish chronicle composed by the so-called Gallus Anonymous, who wrote his text at the beginning of the twelfth century.

Narrant etiam seniores antiqui, quod iste Pumpil a regno expulsus, tantam a muribus persecutionem paciebatur, quod ob hoc a suis consequentibus in insulam transportatus et ab illis feris pessimis illuc transnatantibus in turre lignea tam diu sit defensus, donec pre fetore pestifere multitudinis interempte ab omnibus derelictus, morte turpissima, monstris corrodentibus exspiravit[8]

Venerable persons of old tell a further story, that after this Pumpil was driven from the kingdom he was beset by a horde of rats, and so plagued that his followers ferried him over to an island. However, these horrible creatures even swam over there. For a while he kept himself safe in a wooden tower. But as the stench from the multitude of dead vermin grew, finally he was abandoned by all, and he died a vile and shameful death, gnawed to pieces by these monsters[9].

What interests us here is the phrase *monstris corrodentibus* translated into English as: *gnawed to pieces.* The problem then is how Pumpil (usually called Popiel) died? Latin form here is the famous ablativus absolutus – so according to this we should begin our translation thus: *when monsters* or *because monsters.* What does *corrodere* mean in this context? Present participle *corrodens* means here a kind of action taken in the same moment as the other – here death of the Popiel or causing the other action. So he died when or because mice were gnawing. But whom they were gnawing is not stated. Maybe a wooden tower or a table on which he stood being afraid of the monsters. Why it was a shameful death?– because he died of fear.

Problems of the editions of the historical sources

Above cited Polish chronicler Gallus Anonymous narrates about first Polish ruler from Piast dynasty:

Semouith vero principatum adeptus (non) voluptuose vel inepte iuventutem suam exercuit, sed usu laboris et militie probitatis famam et honoris gloriam acquisivit

When Semouith became a prince he <u>did not</u> waste his youth foolishly in pleasure, but by his steady efforts won both fame for martial prowess and the glory of honor, and extended the boundaries of the realm farther than anyone previously[10].

The *non* in brackets is on the margin of the one of the three preserved codices containing the text of the chronicle. Why put it in a sentence? To protect good reputation of Semowit? When we cannot be sure even if he existed at all?

As we can see reconstructing text may lead not only to historical problems but to the moral ones as well.

Now let us turn to other example of medieval Latin historiography, i.e. Thietmar's Chronicle. Two versions

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[7] Edited in: Skibiński 2014, 46.

[8] *Galli Anonymi Cronicae...*
[9] *Gesta principum Polonorum*, p. 23 and 25.
[10] *Gesta principum Polonorum*, p. 25.

of the text survived. The earlier manuscript still preserves traces of adjustments carried out by the author. Its mistakes we must assign to Thietmar himself. There also survived the so-called second version of the Chronicle known as the Korvei Revision written down in the fifteenth century. It was considered a copy of Thietmar's chronicle with the amendments made by later scribes, until Hartmut Hoffman suggested that we should treat the amendments of the Korvei Revision as essentially made by Thietmar himself or somebody else from the same epoch[11]. Acceptance of this position multiplies Thietmar's chronicle as a historical source at least in the cases where the two copies differ. Even accepting this theory, we cannot automatically assign greater value to the copy of Korvei Revision. On the other hand, the second copy could sometimes have an independent value, if we assume that it comes from an independent source. Let us first examine a notice on the peace in Bautzen (Budziszyn) between Polish king Bolesław Chrobry and the emperor in 1018. The first version of the chronicle goes like this:

Posteaque iussu **suo** et assidua Bolizlavi ducis supplicacione in quadam urbe **Budusin dicta** a Gerone et Arnulfo episcopis et a comitibus **Hirimanno atque Thiedrico** pax sacramentis firmata est et **a Fritherico suimet camerario III. Kal. Februarii**, non ut decuit, set sicut tunc fieri potuit; electisque obsidibus acceptis prefati seniores reversi sunt.[12]

In the revised version of the text it was slightly amended:

Post **hec** iussu **cesaris** et assidua Bolizlavi ducis supplicacione in urbe **Budizin** a Gerone et Arnulfo episcopis et a comitibus **Herimanno et Thiederico et Friderico camerario regio** pax sacramentis firmata est **pridie Kalendas Februarii**, non ut decuit, **sed** sicut tunc fieri potuit; electisque obsidibus acceptis ab invicem reversi sunt[13].

The most significant change concerns the date of the event. In the Korvei revision the date was changed from *III. Kal. Februarii* to *pridie Kalendas Februarii*. In the version from about 1018 with Thietmar's own amendments peace between two rulers was concluded on January 30, 1018 – in Korvei revision on the 31 January. In making criticism of the both versions of the chronicle the older one should be considered as more trustful because it refers to the events of the time it was written down. The Korvei revision on the other hand was copied in fifteenth century, it was based perhaps on the copy from the twelfth century. Thus we can reasonably consider the older copy's version as containing more trustworthy notice concerning the events.

In another passage of the chronicle, which was often commented by historians, Thietmar separately discussed some events concerning the baptism of the Polish prince Mieszko. The importance of the text results from the fact that the baptism was mention here for the first time ever.

In the older version of the text we read thus:
Unde Miseconis, Poleniorum incliti Ducis[14]
Meanwhile, Korvei Revision mistakenly has here:
Unde Miseconis, Bohemiorum ducis incliti[15]

Corrector did not read carefully the text which he corrected. Thus, according to a certain logic he treated Mieszko taking his Czech wife as the Czech ruler. Both examples of such a relationship concerning the peace of Bautzen and a presentation of the Mieszko's wedding show that one cannot hyper estimate Korvei Revision of the Thietmar's chronicle. These are amendments that are difficult to accept.

Conclusion

The reasons why historian neglects his/her sources may seem rational. Behind these rational causes one can usually find political or patriotic feelings as we well know. But not just them. Keeping to the views of our distinguished predecessors or great scholars from abroad can lead to disregarding the simplest rules of historical procedures.

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[11] Hoffmann 1993.

[12] *Thietmari Merseburgensis episcopi Chronicon*, cod.1, p. 492.

[13] *Thietmari Merseburgensis episcopi Chronicon*, cod. 2, p. 493.

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Streszczenie

Problemy z edycją i przekładem źródeł historycznych. Kilka polskich przykładów

Artykuł jest poświęcony nowemu spojrzeniu na problem edycji średniowiecznych, łacińskich źródeł pisanych. Skupia się na ukazaniu, jak ważne jest publikowanie ich w formie możliwie najbliższej temu, co w zachowanych manuskryptach naprawdę się znajduje, ukazując przy okazji nieporozumienia wynikające z nadinterpretacji, niewystarczająco dokładnie opublikowanych (a potem przetłumaczonych), tekstów.