

The Past in the Culture of Medieval Poland

Preface

An interest in “the Past” as a category of cultural reflection in the Middle Ages, most certainly, is an expression of a reassessment over the last decades in the evaluation of sources and in medievalists’ attitude towards the so-called historical reality. Before, predominant was the conviction that the Past simply was and should last in its proper and true form, waiting to be discovered by a historian. If an image of the Past drawn from a source failed to meet the one created by the researcher, these period accounts were branded misleading figments of imagination or outgrowths of ideological misuse.

Only recently, at least in Poland, late medieval displays of historical erudition have been treated with scientific respect. Researchers started to see them as authentic manifestations of the existence of the History or the Past in the time-space and in a community concerned, and not just some lucubration tainted with ignorance. We moved on. Today we are aware that precisely these faulty historical compilations and fantastic narrations constitute first-rate sources for exploring culture of previous epochs. Because we do not criticise them now *sub specie* of clear or better knowledge, which we have, but we are interested, first of all, in the way of thinking of the authors of these works, and in rules according to which they have constructed their statements. So, we admit that the identification of the Past, just like of the Present, by the historians of the past as well as the contemporary ones, in both cases, is a result of negotiations between what the researchers can and want to perceive and what they know.

From time to time appropriate historical (historiographical) constructions are and will constantly be formed to capture one’s own past and thus to better define one’s own present. Naturally, for a long time and without the above-mentioned assumptions, in Medieval Studies, there has been a so-called historiographical reflection on the way of describing-presenting the Past or the History in the Middle Ages or in other epochs. We wanted to make reference to this new current in understanding of medieval writings or statements about the past and to show the structural-ideological planes and contexts of

medieval undertakings that were aimed at that, what has passed away, what the community had already experienced or what – as intellectuals or commoners then thought – should certainly have experienced.

Actually, it seems that the old and new approaches have somehow met halfway in our texts, creating a research proposition, burdened with advantages and disadvantages of both approaches and methodologies. However, all of us were aware that our medieval sources are derivative of particular cultural pragmatic constructivism.

The grant gathered more than 20 authors of various interests and research specialities and of various work “methodologies”, whatever this term would mean. As head of this undertaking, together with Profs. Andrzej Dąbrówka, Halina Manikowska and Piotr Węcowski, neither did I press for any particular research approach to sources nor tried to make forcibly a textbook narrative from the thematically dispersed contributions. To unify various statements a problematic-chronological order has been imposed that generally regulated the narrative method of the participants. Nevertheless, the authors were free to execute their work according to the rule: let people do what they can do best and by what they can say what they consider new and the most interesting.

Hence, in the presented research there seems to be thematic dispersion or, superficially, non-obvious problem areas. A positive aspect of this situation – although now we speak as a casual observer of the whole, the form of which was influenced by other editors, – is a multitude of content and an approach to problems from different, sometimes unexpected, perspectives.

Volume I contains three thematic blocs: The Past depicted in written tradition and in historiographical perspective, the Past and its institutional repositories, the ways of using the Past in religious culture and education. The narrative is opened by Zbigniew Dalewski (*W poszukiwaniu poprzedników – pierwsi Piastowie i ich wizja własnej przeszłości* [In search of predecessors – the first Piasts and their vision of their own Past]), who undertakes a bold project to resurface the main bases of the royal ideology of the rulers who created the Polish State. He demonstrates the Biblical foundations of it, the idea of presenting our monarchs as the ones, who form part of royal kinship in general and of the Biblical kings in particular. We are redirected into quite a different topic by Witold Wojtowicz in five erudite essays on the possibilities of a cultural absorption of West-European epic patterns by our community. Through the example of Gallus Anonymus' *Gesta*, the author forms pioneering observations on mutual relations between the so-called orality and literacy, followed by a look at the local possibilities to construct one's own narrative on heroes and history by using foreign standards (*Carmen Mauri*, the legend of Walter and Helgunda). The question of constructing one's

own epic or epic-historiographical base is also present in the two essays by Wojciech Michalski (*Rodzinne dzieje z nieodległej przeszłości w pamięci polskich rodzin rycerskich* [Family history from the near Past in the memory of Polish knightly families] and *Legendy rodowo-herbowe – pożądanie przeszłości w kręgach rycerstwa polskiego XIV–XVI wieku* [Legends of kinship and coats-of-arms – the lust for the Past among Polish knights of the 14th–16th centuries]). Thoroughly, from scratches of information, he reconstructs kinship legends, created in order to celebrate this community and built upon great historical experiences of its members. From a different research standpoint, these two voices of Witold Wojtowicz and Wojciech Michalski deal with the same issue – “putting together” narrative-epic souvenirs at various levels of intellectual sophistication.

An article by Antoni Grabowski introduces us to a different and a little more traditional world of medieval historiography (*Polska i Polacy w średniowiecznej wspólnocie europejskiej – świadectwo Alberika z Trois Fontaines* [Poland and the Poles in medieval European community – a testimony by Alberic of Trois-Fontaines]). An erudite Cistercian, Alberic of Trois-Fontaines was curious – in the European perspective (imposed also by the Pan-European presence of the Cistercian order) – about what was happening on the political and social stage in various countries. So, he learnt about some matters from fellow monks, he read about others, collecting for the purpose of his work a vast number of references to authorities, usually disclosed. The author is not only reporting Alberic’s knowledge of Polish matters, which has already been done, but also subjecting to deeper criticism this medieval erudite’s workshop, and, in this context, he better defines sources for “Polish” information and also shows factors which shaped or distorted it.

By my own hand, there are essays on our medieval historiography. I would consider the first two the most consistent with the idea of this project. One is about some aspects of the Polish and Great Prehistory’s construction by Wincenty Kadłubek, and its influence on later historiographical visions of our history. The other shows an under-researched side of Gallus’s *Gesta*, treating it as a narrative of kinship history – a comparative approach against the background of similar kinship chronicles of the period (*Mistrz Wincenty i naśladowcy – wizje najstarszych dziejów Polski XIII–XV wieku* [Master Wincenty and his followers – visions of the most ancient history of Poland in 13th–15th centuries]; *Gall Anonim – tradycja historyczna Piastów jako wykład o początkach rodu-dynastii i Polski, w planie podobnych realizacji dziejopisarskich XII stulecia* [Gallus Anonymus – historical tradition of the Piasts as a narrative on the origins of the kinship-dynasty and Poland in a plane of similar annalistic productions of the 12th century]). The next two texts remain within common historiography and describe under-researched works, i.e., the

Prologue to *Rocznik kapituły krakowskiej* [Annals of the Cracow Chapter] and the so-called *Rocznik małopolski* [Lesser Poland Annals], or its prototype (*Prolog do "Rocznika kapituły krakowskiej", św. Stanisław i czas historyczny* [The Prologue to the Annals of the Cracow Chapter, St. Stanislaus and historical time]; *Rocznik tzw. małopolski (minoritycki) z początku XIV wieku – próba dookreślenia zabytku* [The so-called Lesser Poland (Minorite) Annals from early 14th century – an attempt to better define the monument]).

Another sequence of articles is linked to the issue of the Past and its institutional repositories or the ways of safeguarding. In a review paper, but not devoid of analytical values and innovative perspectives, Piotr Węcowski opens for readers a medieval royal treasure vault, showing its contents, staff and, in particular, the development and improvement of this institution over the period in question (*Skarbiec pamięci. Archiwum monarsze w Polsce do początku XVI wieku* [Memory's vault. Royal archives in Poland until the early 16th century]). The vault and its treasures are also a good opportunity for the author to characterise the requirements for the Past, both practical and intellectual, articulated by the vault's owners – through a specific arrangement of this place. An article by Jerzy Kaliszuk is a kind of pendant to the previous text. It deals with other memory's vaults – church book collections and, in a broad sense, the knowledge of the past contained there (*Skarbce pamięci – księgozbiory kościelne* [Memory's vaults – church libraries]). We get an erudite look into rows of main pillars of memory of the past history, into works, manuscripts, owned by Polish greater and lesser ecclesiastical centres in the medieval period.

Marcin Starzyński writes about strategies of memory or remembering events and "texts" important for a community (*Archiwa miejskie w średniowiecznych strategiach pamięci* [Municipal archives in medieval memory strategies]). To distinguish itself from the world around it, to maintain the achieved status, a town promotes and documents (in an archive) the memory of the authority, and its own, mainly communal, uniqueness and sovereignty. In fact, together with the earlier statements, this article also offers quite an insight into medieval people's foresighted fight against oblivion and a loss of control over the past.

An even larger body of contributions is placed in the last problematic chapter of the first volume of the studies. Five texts reflect on ways in which the Past is used in religious culture and education. Under this very "lead" title Andrzej Dąbrówka starts the narrative, formulating important and useful observations as a general intellectual backdrop for the following more detailed reflections – both his own and fellow-authors' of this group of texts. He supplements his reasoning by examples of various, sometimes sophisticated and allusive, use of the Biblical matter – historical in its essence – by

medieval men of letters. In that period, the Past, as we are reminded, is “dif-fused”, when you “reach” for it, you refer to “cultural texts”, especially to such a well-established one as the Scripture.

With a similar message, Maciej Zdanek steps the middle of a problem and traces the presence of the history as a component of teaching and scientific reflection in the *milieu* of the Cracow University (*Obecność historii w nauczaniu i refleksji krakowskiego środowiska uniwersyteckiego w XV wieku* [The presence of history in the teaching and reflection of the Cracow University *milieu* in the 15th century]). When searching for the fields, where the history can exist more sovereignly, he is interested in a scientific status of the history and its place in the teaching process, restricted from one side by the grammar and from the other by the rhetoric. The author’s attention is also fixed on historical (and rhetorical) compendia used at the University or by its masters and their reading material on this subject. Jakub Kubieniec also masterly extracts themes and historical references present in liturgical sources, which, as he notices, do not document history, but are permeated with it (*Commemoratio: sposoby prezentacji i wykorzystania przeszłości w liturgii* [Commemoratio: ways of presentation and use of the past in the liturgy]). While giving a wide panorama of the discussed cases, the author points to the themes or historical contexts that influenced liturgical ceremonies, rituals or customs. In a clear and compelling way he illustrates one of the main premises and at the same time a principle of liturgical customs – to commemorate major events by their cyclical recalling, re-enactment – remembering their course. Then, although unnoticed, the Past or the History always emerges and is updated.

In a manner of speaking, Anna Zajchowska-Bołtromiuk’s article creates a similar research ground on which the author also investigates the traces of the History or the Past, which were left by both these “institutions” in model sermons *de tempore* and *de sanctis* (*Przeszłość w zbiorach kazań modelowych „de tempore” i „de sanctis” mistrzów Uniwersytetu Krakowskiego w XV wieku* [The Past in model sermon collections *de tempore* and *de sanctis* by masters of the Cracow University in the 15th century]). Just like in liturgy, there are no sensational intrusions of the history into the matter covered, but you can count on standards! So, there are “exploited” historical events and well-known heroes, in the narrative wholes involved in the explanation or commenting on certain situations-Biblical scenes, especially from the New Testament (the Roman Empire – the life of Christ).

The volume and the discussed body of texts is closed by a chapter by Halina Manikowska and Dorota Gacka in which the authors investigate “a historicity” within hagiographic works (*Hagiografia a historyczność, czyli o historii w hagiografii i hagiografii w służbie historii* [The hagiography and

the historicity, or about the history in the hagiography and the hagiography in the service of History]). When it comes to the narrative, it differs from the others, aspiring to be a complete, even systematised review of our medieval hagiography, as the authors write, in relation to its “entanglement in History”, but not only. There have been attempts to better define “the topica of a saint’s biography”, “a hagiographer’s workshop”. The issue of “the past-oriented rhetoric” in *Żywot św. Stanisława* [The *vita* of St. Stanislaus] by Wincenty of Kielcza has also been raised. The phenomenon of the cult of saints, including church *patrocinia*, *sanctorale*, collections of *vitae* of saints etc., has also become objects of consideration by the two authors.

The second volume of studies has its own extensive foreword, so we will not duplicate Halina Manikowska’s effort, contenting ourselves with a couple of general observations on it. It is safe to conclude that the authors of the majority of the articles are investigating the revelation or even wedging of the knowledge of the Past or the reflection on it – into rituals activated by social life, into other forms of its existence or into situations, when political and material success of the community depends on a look into the past.

The relics have their plots and stories. When moved, they open new cultural contexts in their new places of “stay”, they link *via* history remote lands and communities (*Przeszłość pod ochroną: relikwie* [The Past protected: the relics] by Halina Manikowska). The ritual, especially the coronation, although it is based on a universal *ordo*, collects and keeps local tradition and gives them sanction of principles of the existing order (*Przeszłość zrytualizowana – tradycja królewskich koronacji* [The ritualised Past – the tradition of royal coronations] by Zbigniew Dalewski). To build a community, a society has to be remembered, especially your loved ones – and this truth is illustrated in a variety of ways by texts by Halina Manikowska (in collaboration with Piotr Okniński, *Przeszłość osobista i tożsamość wspólnotowa. Formy i treści memorii w późnym średniowieczu* [Personal past and communal identity. Forms and subjects of *memoria* in the late Middle Ages]) and by Roman Michałowski (*Wspomnienie modlitewne a pamięć o przeszłości [do końca XIII wieku]* [*Memoria* in prayers and remembering the past, until the end of 13th century]), as well as by Michał Tomaszek with regard to a monastic group (*Przeszłość w tekście i działaniu społeczności klasztornych* [The Past in text and in action of monastic communities]).

An official past of towns, as it is called by the author, is presented by Piotr Okniński. He focuses attention on items, places and undertakings (seals, privileges, clerical books, annalistic notes, law codices, a town hall, etc.), which materialise or visualise the embedding of municipal institutions – and as a consequence, of the whole municipal entity – in historical dimensions, strengthening the municipal identity (*Oficjalna przeszłość miasta* [Official

past of towns]). And, last but not least, Hanna Zaremska shows how under conditions of a different and alien cultural world the Jewish community constructs its identity, also with regard to the history narrated and understood in their own way (*Przeszłość w tożsamości diaspory żydowskiej* [The Past in the identity of the Jewish diaspora]). In turn, Wojciech Brojer in an insightful narrative argues that Paweł Włodkovic's historical hermeneutics has novelty values, when in polemics with the Teutonic Knights' interpretation of the Polish-Teutonic historical relations, he subjects to criticism relevant documents and comes to the correct interpretation of historical events (*[Re]konstrukcja i nagana przeszłości – hermeneutyka Pawła Włodkowica* [(Re)construction and reprimand of the Past – Paweł Włodkovic's hermeneutics]). The issue of Polish-Teutonic skirmishes using historical arguments and a need to activate them during court proceedings is discussed by Halina Manikowska in collaboration with Adam Kozak (*Przeszłość wywołana – zeznania przed sądem* [Past called out – court testimonies]).

In both volumes the Past and the History emerge and dominate. In the volume that has just been discussed not only are they put into words but also shown in iconography (*Przeszłość zobrazowana – święci patroni i władcy* [Pictured Past – saint patrons and monarchs] by Zenon Piech). Both terms are understood differently not only by the authors of the texts but also by the protagonists of their studies. It would be hard to reduce both attitudes (together or separately) to a one and common denomination. Just as it is difficult, if at all possible, to refine in their pure form “historical” and “belonging to the past” things and matters. Besides, that was not an objective intended, as from the beginning various meanings of “historical” experiences and phenomena at both research and source levels were accepted. After all, such imperfection creates a richer offer of exploration, which, hopefully, will make it more enjoyable for a reader.

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