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LATIN AS THE LANGUAGE OF SOCIAL COMMUNICATION
OF THE POLISH NOBILITY
(BASED ON THE LATIN HERALDIC WORK
BY SZYMON OKOLSKI)

To begin with, it is worth noting that in modern history the term of *latinitas* was not only associated with linguistic and stylistic accuracy, required from the citizens of European *res publica litterarum* conversant with spoken and written Latin, but also with ideological content of antiquity conveyed and mediated by the language of ancient Romans. As such, *latinitas* was a fundamental category of humanistic culture.

In the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth *latinitas* served not only as a cultural template, but also as a crucial factor forging the citizens' national identity,¹ as well as a key component of domestic and foreign policy of the Union. In 16th and 17th centuries, only humanistic education, necessitating the command of Latin, paved the way for active engagement in political and social affairs of the Commonwealth citizens.

However, it cannot escape notice that Latin sources and references to the ancient cultural legacy were part and parcel of the Commonwealth daily life of nobility. The integral function of Latin was then to unify the citizens of the essentially decentralised as well as nationally and socially diversified federation comprising the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of

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¹ Jerzy Axer, "Latin as a Factor in the Polish Cultural Identity in the Period of the First Polish Republic (1500–1800)," in *Mare Balticum-Mare Nostrum. Latin in the Countries of the Baltic Sea (1500–1800)*, Acts of the Helsinki Colloquium, ed. Outi Merisalo and Raija Sarasti-Wilenius (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1992), 157–165; idem, "Latin in Poland and East-Central Europe: Continuity and Discontinuity," *European Review* vol. 2, no 4 (1994): 305–309.

Lithuania. It consisted not only of Poles and Lithuanians, but also Germans, Ruthenians, Jews, and other ethnic groups. The Commonwealth citizens used Latin for communication, much in the same way we use English nowadays. Nobility was particularly keen to use Latin. After all, language made it possible to establish their identity, accentuate the bonds between nobility and antiquity as well as European legacy, assert its European identity, and determine the role it was to play in European culture. Furthermore, Latin was used as a religious identity marker that helped Catholic gentry cut themselves off both from neighbouring Muslims, Orthodox Russians and Northern European Protestants.

The theses provided below are to confirm that Latin was used by Polish and Lithuanian nobility not only for communication or to establish national identity, but doubled up as the social language aiming to influence the perception of reality, standpoints and values of the Polish citizens. Notably, it was through little else than language that such virtues as *Virtus*, *Honos*, *Pietas*, *Aequitas*, *Veritas*—hitherto consolidated in the ancient Rome—were assimilated by the old Polish culture as well as constituted ethos of nobility.²

One of the key purposes of communicating in Latin was to shape peoples' attitudes in accordance with those values, and in turn, with the social interests of nobility. The language of the ancient Romans and references to antiquity were meant to influence the potential audience. Such communication was not only intended to carry out informative but also persuasive function. It was also largely orientated at determining the code of conduct of nobility and influencing the public feeling. Hence, its controlling and propagandistic function, as well as the impact it had on modelling a particular mindset cannot pass unaccounted for. Should we consider that the use of Latin was bound up with particular means of expression aimed at reflecting emotions and feelings, we can assume an emotive function of the Commonwealth Latin.

In a three-volume heraldic work written in Latin, *Orbis Polonus*,³ the Black Friar Szymon Okolski introduces a genealogy of Polish and Lithua-

² Barbara Milewska-Ważbińska, "Vera nobilitas. Etos szlachecki na podstawie herbarzy staropolskich," in *Etos humanistyczny*, ed. Piotr Urbański (Warszawa: Neriton, 2010), 177–193.

³ Szymon Okolski, *Orbis Polonus, Splendoribus caeli: Triumphis mundi: Pulchritudine animantium: Decore aquatiliū: Naturae excellentia reptiliū condecoratus. In quo antiqua Sarmatarum gentilitia, pervetustae nobilitatis Poloniae insignia, vetera et nova indigenatus meritorum praemia et arma specificantur et relucēt. Nunc primum, ut latinitati consecratus, ita claritate et veritate perspicuus*, 3 vols (Cracoviae: Caesarius, 1641–1645).

nian noblemen. This group involved several thousand members and formed the social elite among the Commonwealth nations. The historical-genealogical part of the work is preceded by short rhetorical entries detailing heraldic symbolic. Through the use of well-worn notions fossilised in Latin, Okolski managed to achieve not only rhetorical, but also social and political aims. *Virorum magnorum est pugnare pro aequitate, laborem ducere pro virtute, mori pro veritate, ut vivant memoria viridi in posteritate*—as expressed in one of the statements.⁴ Accordingly, among the titular catchphrases illuminating particular statements one can find not only those referring to names rooted in Roman culture, e.g. *Cor Martis, Mars ultor, Martis torax, Martis vox, Bellona Christiana* or *Maecenas verus*, but also chapter titles pointing up Roman virtues, such as: *Virtutis hic honos, Virtus laudata, Honor summus, Labor in virtute, Virtutis iter, Virtutis monitorium, Virtutis solidae stemma, Virtutum laurea, Virtutum palaestra, Virtutum navis, Virtus excelsa, Palma virtutum, Pietatis tabula, Pietatis domicillum, Pietatis sanctuarium, Veritas coronata*. The quoted chapter titles as well as textual content helped preserve historical, social, and individual memory. The virtues enumerated above were attributed to both the upper class in general, and to its individual members. The target language enabled Okolski to safeguard the old tradition, along with its references to antiquity, as well as help particular houses establish their own ancient legacy. By doing this, not only did he describe a reality, but essentially created it. Therefore, by recurrently articulating the notion of family as: *familia antiqua, antiquissima* or *antiquitate praestantissima*, Okolski invoked tradition and resuscitated antiquity at one fell swoop.

The application of Latin in a heraldic work allowed houses to claim continuity of their own history with antiquity. Latin perfectly fitted in with the contemporary public imagination fostering the assumption about the Republic of Nobles as the second Rome and comparing the Polish rulers and dignitaries to the ancient heroes. Therefore, they would gladly wend their way to the battles of Mars (*bella Martia*) with the sole purpose of serving their motherland not only in peace but also during wartime (*toga et sago*). Furthermore, such notions as *res publica* or *civis* were conducive to the sense of collective responsibility for the country. The *Orbis Polonus* reader learns that Jakub Dembiński of the house of Rawicz abandoned his son,

⁴ Okolski, *Orbis Polonus*, vol. 3, 218.

Walenty, referred to as *magnus patriae civis*,⁵ and Jerzy Tomicki of Łódź as *civis Patriae optimus* signed the election of king Władysław IV.⁶ These expressions directly refer to the political system of the Roman republic. It is largely thanks to Latin that they remained deeply rooted in the public imagination of the Commonwealth citizens and nobility.

A significant role in Okolski's work is played by exempla, whose task is to provide arguments. They provide a positive—rarely negative—account of moral content. Exempla comprise both classical anecdotes and biblical motifs or historical narratives. Mythical and historical heroes are invoked; biblical characters are mentioned. Although at times naturalistic observations might double up as exempla, they are by and large derived from literary sources.

One of the characters intermittently invoked in Okolski's armorial is an anecdotic ruler of Scythians Scilurus,⁷ who on his deathbed earnestly explained to his sons the importance of amity and unity in ruling the country. The source inspiring the anecdote is the treatise from *Moralia: De garrulitate* (On Talkativeness) and *Apophthegmata* by Plutarch,⁸ in early modern era frequently rewritten in Latin. In a text glorifying the virtues of the members of the house of Kalinowa there is a chapter entitled *Infractus miles*. Okolski commences his disquisition with the abovementioned anecdote: *Infractum militem filios dum Scilurus Scythia optabat, hoc medio illos commo-nuit*.⁹ Should it be assumed that nobility was descended from ancient Sarmatians related to Scythians, it might be accepted that a nobleman to whom these words were addressed could even acknowledge Scirulus as his antecedent. The reader learns that since Scirulus wished his sons to become steadfast soldiers, he showed them a bunch of arrows. He would first order his eldest son to break it. When the latter claimed it was impossible, he passed it to the other brother. When the younger repeated just the same, he grabbed the bunch and started breaking them all one by one. He then added: *Ita vos si uniti inter se fueritis, nullus vos franget nec superabit, si vero divisi et disrupti manseritis, quivis debilius vos vincet, prosternet*.¹⁰ Given that a united virtue is stronger, this hint had better not be disregarded – as

⁵ Okolski, *Orbis Polonus*, vol. 2, 590.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 171.

⁷ E.g. in a description of the coat of arms of Kalinowa, Gryzima, Ciołek, Ślepowron.

⁸ Plutarchus, *De garrulitate*, 511; *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata*, 174f.

⁹ Okolski, *Orbis Polonus*, vol. 1, 517.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

concluded by Okolski—and while in agreement small things grow infinitely, in contention even grand designs fall into pieces descending into nothingness. United we stand, divided we fall.

Aside from exempla, Okolski mostly tends to support his theses with quotations, which enrich the text and serve as rhetorical arguments. The author of the roll of arms invokes Latin historical sources, quotes *Vulgata*, provides passages from Latin poetry. In his work he strongly alludes to symbolic, drawing on the 16th and 17th century Latin iconographic and emblematic books. One of the dominant modes of strengthening the argumentation line provided in the quotation is invoking an author acknowledged as authority. It may be that the solemnity of such a person is emphasised by epithets implying positive value judgment, e.g. *sapientissimus Cato*.¹¹ The passage: *Caesar Ripa eximius eques inter nobiles et miles probatus inter milites*¹² refers to the author of *Iconology*, many a time alluded to by Okolski. The names of classical authors usually speak for themselves and do not require epithets. Hence, they will be articulated as: *dicebat Terentius*,¹³ *dicebat Plautus*,¹⁴ *Plato existimabat*,¹⁵ *inquit Seneca*,¹⁶ *ergo Claudianus concludat*,¹⁷ *ergo meditare illud Horatianum*,¹⁸ *illud Horatii*.¹⁹ Every now and then, however, the author of the roll of arms appears not to care to lay emphasis on the common name recognition of the author of a quotation or story. Therefore, a poem or apothegm by an anonymous author is often preceded by: *bene quidam* or *quidam reliquit*. By doing this, the readers, uninfluenced by a grand name, can identify with the anonymous authors of the cited opinions. Worthy of note is that Okolski tends also to include cryptoquotations. As regards quotations from the works of canonical authors, it remains arguable to what extent they were recognised. It appears that the reader could track down a slightly modified quote from *Aeneid* entwined in the following passage from *Princeps optimus* describing the *Wąż tertio alias Wężyk* coat of arms: *Nulla salus bello, pacem te poscimus omnes* (Verg. *Aen.* 11,362).²⁰

¹¹ Okolski, *Orbis Polonus*, vol. 1, 204.

¹² *Ibidem*, vol. 2, 354.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 38.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, vol. 3, 246.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 265.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 258.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 281.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 218.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, vol. 1, 24.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, vol. 3, 281.

Incorporating catchy poetic fragments as well as cryptoquotations into Latin speeches and sermons was fairly typical in early modern period. Poetic depiction heightened the sense of the argumentation prominence and exuded the aura of the sublime. In Okolski's roll of arms both passages from the works by renowned classical poets and Latin modern poems add to the solemnity and loftiness of expression.

The praise of Stefan Batory's typographer, awarded with a coat of arms, is topped by the following couplet:

Illustrem fama magnum simul arte piumque
Virtus et pietas ipsaque fama vehunt.²¹

Exposition of the abovementioned Roman virtues: *Virtus* and *Pietas*, was to call attention to the renown and testify to the typographer's nobility.

It verges on the impossible to enumerate all works alluded to by Okolski in his oeuvre. Among the quoted authors included are mainly historians and authors of heraldic works: Marcin Kromer, Stanisław Sarnicki, Bartosz Paprocki, as well as authors of emblematic works and hieroglyphs: Andrea Alciato, Pierio Valeriano. Oft-quoted are also poets: Klemens Janicki (Ianicus), Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski (Sarbievius), as well as the English author of epigrams, John Owen (Iohannes Ovenus).

Apparently, Szymon Okolski's roll of arms was to be used by the nobility not only as a historical document. *Orbis Polonus* can be undoubtedly classified as a literary work, and most of all, as a pattern for rhetorical speech. Quotations, phrases, verbal and philosophical concepts associated with the coat of arms symbolic put forward by Okolski could be then used during national, religious, family celebrations, which were part and parcel of culture of nobility. The combination of classical examples as well as numerous quotations in a heraldic work was to have yet another dimension: it added to the sense of superiority of nobility, which could now assert itself as intellectual elite.

To sum up, Szymon Okolski deliberately wrote his work in Latin. The language of the ancient Romans was best fitted as a communication code characteristic of all upper-class elites. Okolski's choice, however, could be attributed not only to the fact that Latin made for communication tool, but also that it influenced the perception of reality by nobility; was the carrier of cultural memory, in relation to which the citizens of the Commonwealth would construct their national identity.

²¹ Okolski, *Orbis Polonus*, vol. 2, 38.

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ŁACINA JAKO JĘZYK KOMUNIKACJI SPOŁECZNEJ POLSKIEJ SZLACHTY
(NA PODSTAWIE ŁACIŃSKIEGO DZIEŁA HERALDYCZNEGO
SZYMONA OKOLSKIEGO)

Streszczenie

W artykule podkreśla się rolę języka łacińskiego jako języka komunikacji społecznej szlachty zamieszkującej Rzeczpospolitą Obojga Narodów. Na początku omawia się pojęcie *latinitas*, które oznaczało nie tylko poprawną łacinę, lecz także wskazywało na treści ideowe antyku przekazywane za pomocą języka starożytnych Rzymian. W artykule prześlędono proces wykorzystania łaciny jako narzędzia pozwalającego na utrzymanie więzi społecznej. Badaniu poddano łaciński herbarz *Orbis Polonus* Szymona Okolskiego (Kraków 1641-1645). Okazało się, że język tego dzieła pełnił nie tylko funkcję informacyjną, lecz także perswazyjną, propagandową i emotywną. W konkluzji stwierdza się, że Okolski świadomie napisał swe dzieło w języku starożytnych Rzymian.

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Key words: Latin, roll of arms, nobility.

Słowa kluczowe: łacina, herbarz, szlachta.