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THE AKATHIST HYMN TO THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY
AND POLISH MARIAN SONGS
IN CONTEXT OF PERFORMATIVE PRACTICES
IN LITANY TRADITION

For the religiousness of Byzantine East the cult of Virgin Mary became the centre of liturgical practices. The fullest expression of that cult is a thanksgiving hymn: *Akathist hymn to Blessed Virgin Mary*. It initiated a whole group of liturgical texts called akathists (or akafists in Church-Slavonic language). What is specific for that type of hymn is the way it is performed – *akatistos* – which means “while standing” or literally “while not sitting”. It contains a stanza dedicated to Mary as a defender and saviour of the city.

It was assumed that the text was written in 7th century after fighting off Pannonian Avars attacking in 626 Constantinople. It was first performed then as we can prove. People crowded on the streets in procession carrying a picture of *Theotokos* literally “God-Bearer” or “Birth-Giver of God” probably in the form of *Hodogetria*. However traditional hypothesis accepted by most researchers claims that the text comes from the middle of 6th century and was written by Romanos the Melodist – the greatest poet and hymnographer of Byzantium who lived around years 490-540¹.

Actually Romanos the Melodist’s² name points at his function. Creators of religious songs were in Byzantine culture called melodists until 9th century. “A mel-

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¹ A. BRZÓSTKOWSKA, *Hymn Akathistos – próba interpretacji*, [in:] *Kultura bizantyjska, jej późniejsze słowiański wcielenia i kontynuacje: materiały sekcji bizantyno-słowianoznawczej*, ed. curavit A. Szwalbe, ed. A. Bezwiński i E. Harendarska, (seria Acta Slavica VIII, vol. 2. Musica antiqua Europae Orientalis), Bydgoszcz 1988, p. 49.

² *Ibidem*, p. 89.

odist is a poet and a musician who, similarly to ancient Greece traditions, wrote words and composed melody”³. During the period of iconoclasm those two functions were separated and creators of hymns began to be called hymnographers⁴. Thus melodists were the same for Byzantium as aoidos for ancient Greece. As the legend of Romanos the Melodist goes all the melodists possessed the skill of improvisation and were proficient in oral features. Melodists had to be well-educated and artistically talented. Their songs were created in action as oral, improvised construct based on certain rules.

The fascination of the West with that text led to transformations in Marian devotions⁵. Witold Sadowski points at two ways of development for *Akathist*: it became the inspiration for the litany genre in the West and for the akathist genre in the East. Christian West has never assimilated akathist despite many literary attempts and translations, whereas the East does not know litany in its Latin form. Both genres used charetisms (regards)⁶.

The influence of the *Akathist hymn to the Blessed Virgin Mary* is connected with its first translation into Old Church Slavonic language around 10th century⁷. In 14th century its imitations appeared – texts by two patriarchs of Constantinople Isidor I and Philotheos Kokkinos⁸.

Westwards spread was also connected with admiration aroused by the *Akathist's* stanzas first translated in Venice – a radiant centre of akathist tradition for Europe. According to Gilles Gerard Meersseman the translation was done between years 787 and 813 by bishop Christophor I, who in 810 had to escape Venice and stayed at Benedictine monastery *Abbey of Reichenau* on Reichenau Island in Lake Constance, where he probably left Latin translation of *Akathist*. From there abbots or maybe even Christophor himself carried copies to Saint Gallen and Paris⁹. Until today we have preserved eight Latin translations of the text¹⁰ the oldest of which, Parisian one coming most probably from Saint Denis church was written down in the middle of 10th century¹¹.

³ Ibidem, p. 87.

⁴ O. JUREWICZ, *Historia literatury bizantyńskiej. Zarys*, Wrocław 1984, p. 87.

⁵ G.G. MEERSSEMAN, *Der Hymnos Akathistos im Abendland*, Freiburg 1958, vol. I, p. 3.

⁶ W. SADOWSKI, *Litania i poezja*, Warszawa 2011, p. 60.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 60.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 62.

⁹ See: G.G. MEERSSEMAN, *Der Hymnos Akathistos...*, vol. I, p. 50-51.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 14.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 12-14. Source N – Parisian manuscript, from 10th century (Nat. Lat. 18168). Source II – also Parisian – from the end of 11th century from the church of Saint-Remi in Reims (Mazarine 693). The another translation of *Akathist* (Source P) is kept also in Paris (Nat. Lat. 2153) and it comes

The structure of *Akathist hymn to the Blessed Virgin Mary* is based on interlace of two types of stanza: kontakion and ikos. *Akathist* consists of 24 stanzas or – more precisely – of twelve binary constructions: kontakion-ikos. Each stanza is begun with subsequent letters of Greek alphabet keeping the form of abecedarius which helps mnemotechnic. Each ikos is built of twelve chiaretisms (“greetings” or “regards”) named after Greek word *χαίρε*¹² meaning “welcome” or “be greeted” which Latin culture transformed into *ave* or – sometimes – *gaude*¹³. The meaning of *χαίρε* in chiaretism systems stems from its classical Greek meaning “greetings” and also “hearten, encourage”, but it is also connected with Hebrew *shalom* (“may the peace be with you” – the way Archangel Gabriel greeted Maria) or with *benedicta* as well as with archaic Indo-European cultural meaning connected with practices of enchanting¹⁴.

Presence of this hymn in Latin culture of the West is connected with its Italian way, especially with Venice where the strongest tradition of litany processions for the Blessed Mary the Virgin occurred. Venice kept cultural connection with Byzantium for a long time and that is why we may find similar traditions in both. Blachernae cult¹⁵, the cult of a picture carried around during the victory over Avars mentioned above, moves to Venice and from there tradition of litany constructions reaches Paris and Saint Denis Abbey¹⁶. The structure of Venice Litany addressed to Mother of God¹⁷ is close to *Akathist hymn to the Blessed Virgin Mary* – an expanded text with many inclusions¹⁸.

In Italian region there was no isolated phenomenon called litany literature. The term “litany culture” seems more appropriate to describe all the practises connected with Marian religiousness inherited after Byzantine cult. “Greek word *λιτανεια*, which was later Latinized in the West into <litany> originally, in the first centuries of the Church, meant “pleading” or “imploation” and did not mean a genre in

from the 12th, 13th century from z Cistercian abbey in Foucarmont. Source Q is also Parisian manuscript (Nat. Lat. 17491), which was made in Parisian monastery in 13th century. Manuscript with letter R is a Latin translation of *The Akathist hymn to the blessed Virgin Mary* (Nat. Lat. 2333A). It comes from a breakthrough of 13th and 14th century. The next source – manuscript S (the beginning of the 13th century) is now in British Museum (Royal GB XIV). Unfortunately, the material is incomplete. In the end – the Brussels source – letter Σ (Cod. II 1420, Bd. IV, 1869) from the second half of 12th century, made in Premonstratensian abbey.

¹² See: W. SADOWSKI, *Litania...*, p. 52.

¹³ G.G. MEERSSEMAN, *Der Hymnos Akathistos...*, vol. I, p. 16-17.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 52-57.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 25-26.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 51-52.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, vol. II, p. 215 and W. SADOWSKI, *Litania...*, p. 64.

¹⁸ G.G. MEERSSEMAN, *Der Hymnos Akathistos...*, vol. II, p. 48.

modern shape”¹⁹. In Parma, Reggio²⁰ or Venice since 13th century there have been organized processions with Marian pictures, accompanied by greeting chants, listing different attributes, traits of Mary²¹. In many of such processions troubadours used to take part who created songs praising Mother of God. Many of such hymns are known nowadays as *Salve Regina*.

They were actually shows, performances in honour of Mary. Combination of instruments’ sound, singing, colourful robes of priests and dignitaries, shapes of pictures brought liturgy close to theatre²². It made mystical experiences possible for the whole crowd by including all the participants in action. Litany culture is in fact culture of act and performance. The structure of litany sung, formed a community. Separate callings strengthened emotional binding with Mother of God and kept listing new forms of Her presence in the lives of believers. Litany culture is also a culture of memory put into action. Theatralization of sacred reality, introducing particular practice into liturgy like movements, music, forming the patterns of behaviour, and it all resulting in multimedia character of the litany procession extravaganza depict memory as act. Separate names of Mary that form the structure of litany become single pictures evoked from memory by specific action. Act of procession, ascension of a picture, use of frankincense, movement of fabric in liturgical robes, generate a specific reaction – they formulate a concrete image of Mary and join it with cultural memory.

That way Greek paean of praise becomes inspiration for the whole trend of religious literature addressed to Mother of God²³. Current litany pattern begins with the Litany of the Saints. According to findings of Pawol Wincer typical form of litany is composition without verbs²⁴. The whole structural weight of litany is placed in its emotional sphere²⁵. However this typical structure is not primary pattern. If we accept *Akathist hymn to the Blessed Virgin Mary* as basis of Latin litany texts and derive the whole greeting poetry from it we should speak about verb litany.

There is another reason to treat *Akathist* as unique piece; it is quite exceptional for the text of prayer to obtain iconic representation. But this is exactly how

¹⁹ W. SADOWSKI, *Litania...*, p. 25.

²⁰ G.G. MEERSSEMAN, *Der Hymnos Akathistos...*, vol. I, p. 28.

²¹ About the Venice litany see: W. SADOWSKI, *Litania...*, p. 63-64.

²² G.G. MEERSSEMAN, *Der Hymnos Akathistos...*, vol. I, p. 29.

²³ W. SADOWSKI, *Litania...*, p. 47.

²⁴ P. WINCER, *Nowoczesne odmiany formy litanijnej. Na przykładzie poematu Františka Halasa “Stare kobiety” i wiersza Vítězslava Nezvala “Piešň nad piešňami”*, [in:] *Studia z teorii i historii poezji*, ed. M. Głowiński, Wrocław 1970, seria II, p. 397.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 83-85 – emotions in litany.

akathist icon came into existence. It is more often to meet icon that was basis for akathist – a hymn based on pattern first presented by Romanos the Melodist.

Popularity of akathist icons is characteristic especially to Balkan countries where they appeared in 14th century. Actually *Akathist hymn to the Blessed Virgin Mary* is present in iconography of Eastern Church since 11th century but it does not mean that only icons are strictly in akathist manner. There are also cycles of paintings depicting *Akathist* decorating Orthodox Churches and Monasters. It is typical for Athos art, also present in Balkans²⁶.

In most Orthodox countries the image of Mother of God in manner of *Hodegetria* is used during liturgy. It can be explained both by tradition and by historical sources. According to passages from times of invasion of Avars' fleet, performing *Akathist* by the society of Constantinople was simultaneous to carrying around the city icon in this particular type. It was the first exemplar of *Hodegetria* depicted by Saint Luke the Evangelist during Marian illumination. That is why *Hodegetria* is the centre of akathist icon. The akathist service is performed standing in front of that icon. In the moment of service hymn is referred to the character depicted – cult moves from imagination to Proto-Picture.

That way of service opposite a Marian icon started the whole group of akathist rites, which combined usage of words (in hymns sung) and picture. Their dialogue is based on adoration, returning of mediated honour and aiming it towards *sacrum*. Akathist liturgy includes different ways of functioning the word: in singing, by depicting in an icon and by eliciting it from memory. As Havelock concluded we are dealing with an idea of performance²⁷. That idea uses the language of rites and celebration which is the first form of organizing cultural memory²⁸.

Akathist icon consists of several elements. Its main layout is similar to icons depicting biographies of saints. In the centre there is usually an image of Mother of God in *Hodegetria* type or sitting on a throne with Baby on her lap. So it is a representation of Throne of Wisdom but surrounded by prophets and saints that is why it may also be named *Praise of Mother of God*. These two representations of Mary are bound with the way she is presented in *Akathist* and both introduce the most important function of Mary in religious experience. They both present, similarly to *Akathist*, close relation between Mary and Christ. The akathist way of interlacing

²⁶ E. KOCÓJ, *Świątynie, postacie, ikony. Malowane cerkwie i monastery Bukowiny Południowej w wyobrażeniach rumuńskich*, Kraków 2006, p. 347.

²⁷ E.A. HAVELOCK, *Muza uczy się pisać: rozważania o oralności i piśmienności w kulturze Zachodu*, Warszawa 2006, p. 95.

²⁸ J. ASSMANN, *Pamięć kulturowa. Pismo, zapamiętywanie i polityczna tożsamość w cywilizacjach starożytnych*, Warszawa 2008, p. 72-74.

the Marian and Christ's plots in context of salvation are closely connected to the Dogma of Incarnation – the main thread of the hymn.

Central image is surrounded by representations of scenes from *Akathist* put within frames, as if panels of Western painting. The basic number of frames is twenty four – as many as the number of stanzas in *Akathist*. It is defined by descriptions formed in *Hermeneia* – the only known post-Byzantine painting manual that compiles texts written after 1566 by Dionysus of Furna in years 1730-34 on Athos Mountain²⁹.

The second way of depicting scenes from *Akathist* is presenting them in cycle of paintings in the decorative area of a church. The finest example are paintings from southern Bukowina, especially the church dedicated to Sleep of Mother of God in Vatra Moldoviței founded by hospodar Peter IV Rareș in 1532. This type of sacral buildings is specific for Romania and Moldova where polychrome is outside on the facade of a building. Naturally this does not prevent decorations from being placed also inside a building.

The cycle of paintings put on the southern wall of Vatra Moldoviței was planned similarly to descriptions found in *Hermeneia* by Dionysus of Furna. The only thing different is the area of presentation. On the wall, instead of desk, there are twenty four “houses” of Mother of God presented. The composition lacks central icon, which was typical for akathist icons. Polychrome is mostly composed horizontally (the scenes are placed in horizontal equipollent stripes) which is usual for painting cycles decorating the insides of churches and monasteries. Each iconographic topic is placed on a single wall or part of a wall with clear separation from other paintings. Areas separated with distinct outline contain one scene. Therefore in the cycle of *Akathist* we may recognize usage of frames used on different basis.

Intriguing part in the decoration of church in Vatra Moldoviței is additional scene in the *Akathist* cycle. It is the picture *Siege of Constantinople*. Its meaning is consistent with the dedication (or invocatory) stanza in honour of the Brave Hetmaness, who protected her city from Avars invasion. Historical sense allowed to develop a traditional model described by Dionysus of Furna. That makes people remember the first confirmed performance of *Akathist* connected with miraculous interference of Mother of God. This is how the experience and presentation of a miracle enters iconography of an icon. Apart from Vatra Moldoviței that presentation was also depicted in other temples: Humor, Voroneț, Saints George and Dymitr in Suczawa, Baia, Rîșca, Sf. Ilie near Suczawa and in Probota³⁰.

²⁹ M. SMORAĞ-RÓŻYCKA, *Wstęp*, [in:] DIONIZJUSZ Z FURNY, *Hermeneia, czyli objaśnienie sztuki malarzkiej*, Kraków 2003, p. IX.

³⁰ E. KOCÓJ, *Świątynie, postacie, ikony...*, p. 346.

Tradition of *Akathist hymn to the Blessed Virgin Mary* and closely related to it akathist icon is fully expressed in the very act of performance. Each vocalisation of the hymn becomes a moment of ceremonial feast³¹, a sacral time when according to mythical plan all is returned to the beginning. *Akathist* is a perfect form of dialogue between profanum and sacrum. Its performing allows entering and experiencing the Holy Word³². Therefore it is accompanied by specific actions that stimulate the possibility of entering a different realm. That way holy and unholy time and space are united and singing *Akathist* gives possibility to perform a rite of passage and to transgress borders separating *sacrum* from *profanum*.

Separate stanzas of *Akathist hymn to the Blessed Virgin Mary* keep the very same structure. They are sung with the same melody based on Greek eight tones, that change in particular parts. Different melody is for a priest and different for choir. That changes make the whole hymn sound more dynamic. Separate groups of singers are involved and the experience of dialogue, typical for this genre, is strengthened. Dialogue implies particular activities connected to remembering. Text of the hymn seems to be evoked from the memory by particular acts, performances that constitute the celebration. They create a rite.

That rite is happening only in specific moments of holiday (holy day). In Catholic Church *Akathist* is sung during important Marian celebrations: Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary and Immaculate Conception. In Orthodox Church they are connected to Easter celebrations and specific days are pointed during which specific icons are praised with specific hymns.

Ritual singing, act of remembering and reproducing tradition, actualisation of that tradition is also connected to specific space. Singing the *Akathist* relates to division of space into holy and secular parts³³. It emphasizes relations between its values. Singing and actualisation of rite leads to sacralising the space. Covering with singing, voice, is actually marking the borders of sacred territory. Eastern Orthodox music does not use any instruments. Human's voice is the carrier of melody and sound. Its reach marks sanctity. Heard from away singing leads the faithful and determines the size of the space that becomes the universe, the harmony. That space reaches a verst (a little over a kilometre) unit of measurement used in Russia and Kingdom of Poland. A circle of such radius becomes a place excluded from chaos surrounding for the time of singing. A man is also an icon of sound – bearer

³¹ M. ELIADE, *Czas święty i mity*, [in:] IDEM, *Sacrum, mit, historia. Wybór esejów*, Warszawa 1974, p. 86-87.

³² G. VAN DER LEEUW, *Fenomenologia religii*, Warszawa 1997, p. 355-360.

³³ M. ELIADE, *Święty obszar i sakralizacja świata*, [in:] IDEM, *Sacrum...*, p. 61.

of heavenly music due to angels. Only with his voice songs praising saints may be performed. Liturgy on earth is a reflection of eternal liturgy that takes place in heaven. Instruments are in Orthodox tradition considered additional super value, characteristic to secular, often sinful music leading to perdition. Human voice on the other hand articulates sanctity, carries Holy Word and that is why its range determines sacred space.

It is obvious that voices spread differently in temples. They are the best places to sing a hymn and actualize memory. In a temple human voice is restrained within building's walls and lasts within them multiplied and strengthened by acoustic construction. Closed doors during service cut off sound from silence outside. The faithful gathered inside a temple become listeners and participants of a ritual. They do not take part in singing itself – in Orthodox tradition *Akathist* is sung by priest together with choir consisting usually of members of monastery. The song however floats through the faithful, joins them into a community of performance and confirms their participation in mystery of memory. Voices vibrate thanks to acoustics of a temple. It stimulates the faithful to remind the words of *Akathist* and repeat them in mute movements of lips. So the participation in the ritual is not vocal – it is silent which does not mean passive. Actualization of the song happens only within an act. It is a particular action that makes it occur. Listeners also participate in the act. Their presence build up the meaning of *Akathist* – it becomes a song existing not only on the level of sound but also on the level of thoughts, emanating inside the faithful. Vocalisation strengthens its artistic distribution but true hymn in honour of Mother of God comes into existence in hearts and minds of people gathered in the temple, within the range of human voice is the space of secret rite.

In situation of performing *Akathist hymn to the Blessed Virgin Mary* alternance of singing and alternance of space, change in distances implied by specific use of voice become very important. Space marked out by singing is not homogenic despite it belongs to sacred area. Ritual of singing a hymn consists of many components. As I have said a song consists of different stanzas sung by different persons. Priest's parts are sung in area of chancel or in front of *analojchyk* (a table) on which there is an icon as the receiver of *Akathist*. It is always a public distance but depending on a church's size it can be in closer or farther phase³⁴. It does not assume engaging in interaction itself³⁵, in rite's flow but participation by active, mnemonic reception.

A faithful cannot cross his space or the function imposed on him by specific character of performing the hymn. Priest's place is marked by a barrier of icons

³⁴ E.T. HALL, *Ukryty wymiar*, Warszawa 2005, p. 157.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 157.

that form a wall of iconostasis or by the act of turning priest's back to the faithful and facing the icon. That way the proest and the icon keep close relation as the sender and the receiver of the message, the one who praises and that what receives those praises – agent of sanctity.

Separate space is also marked for choir, which faces the faithful. So the relation between those parts is different. The receiver of words – ikos – sung by choir is not only the icon but also the community. Such communication strengthens their bonds which is based on repetitive mnemotechnic structures. Spaces of choir and priest must be “specifically strengthened”³⁶. Those areas must be separated and clearly privileged in comparison with the faithful's area. They mark consecutive levels of admittance to *sacrum* mystery, to performance of the rite.

Moreover the meaning of the left and right side is important. Orthodox churches are oriented. While singing *Akathist* priest is usually on the left side of the faithful, which is the south. Its meaning is positively interpreted. Choir is normally placed on the right side – the north – much less valuable, sometimes even considered dangerous. However those directions are often changed depending on where the icon – receiver of *Akathist* – is placed. Each time alternance of singing and different localisation of a priest forces the alternance of direction for the voices. Thus we experience the movement. Song comes from different parts of the world, and from its different levels: different intensity of sanctity.

In Catholic church and some Orthodox churches parts of choir are also sung by community. That changes the meaning of space. The area marked by a priest's singing is considered of intense sanctity and clearly separated from the area of a choir united with community. Alternance of singing in that case changes the cultural distance. Priest's singing and his position remain in public distance whereas choir's and faithful's singing is a social distance³⁷. Important thing is to create relation and possibility of cooperation. Hymn sung in that way constitutes a different way of creating a community and a different character of a community itself. It is not only spiritual level and its influence “inside” based on mystical act anymore but also a possibility of articulating and vocalization of memory structures thanks to actual vocal participation in singing a hymn.

The last important element of action introduced in performance of *Akathist hymn to the Blessed Virgin Mary* is associating it with akathist icon. Its presence visualises the words of the orthodox hymn. Separate frames placed in typical for the whole community order imply subsequent recollections evoked from memory.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 162.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 154-155.

It is yet another mnemotechnic procedure beside the structure of the text, its form of abecedaries and alternate singing. The order of pictures in separate “houses” structurally reminds a Latin mystery plays. Travel along consecutive mansions was a travel through the whole spectacle. Similarly in akathist icon each of the “houses” is marked with successive letter of Greek or Old-Church-Slavonic alphabet keeping the form of abecedaries. Performance of *Akathist hymn to the Blessed Virgin Mary* is also a mystical travel through consecutive “houses”. As Frances Yates says: building of such house or mansion of memories is the ancient way of memorizing. According to that akathist icon is a building – edifice erected so that the faithful could read and sing the whole hymn by travelling through its rooms following the letters of an alphabet. The text is put within separate frames – houses or rooms of this edifice of memory. The travel uses *ars memoriae* – which means the usage of particular parts locked in particular rooms. Alphabet is a useful clue for those of the faithful who can read. Many members of the community used also the direction and arrangement of pictures and their content.

That makes the akathist icon a multimedia phenomenon communicating by different channels but always referring to forms of memory. Making and reading that icon is an act of active remembering that demands action, movement and constant activation. Akathist icon talks with pictures representing particular scenes, with *Akathist's* text it evokes, with letters of alphabet that put the scenes in order, and last but not least – in induces singing. It is also a musical picture that saves the notes of the whole hymn and puts them into the mansion of memory. There they wait for the next evoking, next actualization. Multimedia character is also connected with movement, the travel through consecutive rooms. There is no possibility of physical touching the icon but by following it with eyes almost a physical transfer to successive parts of transmission is achieved. Akathist icon is a form of aid or clue that helps with recalling parts of text but without actual writing, especially in choir's parts where mnemotechnical elements are emphasized.

Following with eyes may remind of some mystical travel, a way of passage through paths of spiritual experience. There is no physical element as in rosary in which one may feel separate prayer beads. Akathist icon works by sense of hearing but not touch. Its purpose is to recall from memory particular musical phrase, rhythm, melody. It is a mystical mandala prayer for an eye and an ear.

Performance of *Akathist hymn to the Blessed Virgin Mary* is a constant travel through cardinal directions, man's directions, relations and distances, levels of *sacrum* and *profanum*, dialogue between words and pictures. This path becomes a uniting ritual.

Akathist is suspended between all the above and is shaped by their mutual influence. Therefore each performance is unique since it is formed by meeting of

different people, their dialogue and their search of unity in tradition. Such understanding of performance of this hymn makes it a form of cultural memory: "memorial figures often possess a religious meaning and bringing them into existence by recollection is often considered a holy event"³⁸. What is especially underlined by Assmann is connection between cultural memory and experience of *sacrum*, which enlarges the span and way of affecting of transmitted content.

Also important is the aspect of foundation memory as one of modes of communicative memory. Inside the foundation memory the elements of the rite are preserved, its structure, functionality and all the actions that happen during its performance. Foundation memory carries a system of signs that are supposed to support memory and identity of the group concerning their beginnings and virtues. This multimedia effect of *Akathist hymn to the Blessed Virgin Mary* and akathist icon points at usage of collective term *memoria*³⁹. "By relation to the past the presence of the group that recalls it is constituted"⁴⁰. And that is the aim of a memory act.

The meeting of two different Christian cultures can be observed not only in visual art and in liturgy, but also in religious literature. The example of such contact is the influence of the Orthodox hymn *The Akathist hymn to the blessed Virgin Mary* in Marian literature. The reception of this piece in Polish culture has a very long tradition. It started with Bernardines, who, probably, brought the Latin translation of this hymn to Poland. The presence of *Akathist* was also confirmed in the 17th C. when in 1648 Symeon Połocki made a translation of this text into Polish which was inspired by Jan Kochanowski's poetic language. We can also see the influence of this Orthodox hymn in many Marian religious Catholic texts, especially in Polish songs to the Mother of God.

The relations between *Akathist* and Polish Marian songs in the 15th century were based not on direct influence, but on a travesty of particular motives appropriated from the Orthodox hymn. The dialogue of the two cultures in this context represent an original example of cross cultural exchange. The similarity of languages and cultural affinity allowed to use this hymn as inspiration while making native Polish songs to the Mother of God. It was characteristic to use and adapt into the Polish ground some parts of the structure and composition patterns of the Orthodox hymn. The acrostic structure was easy to remember and allowed for a specific reception of the *Akathist* in the poetic language of Latin-rite songs in Poland.

³⁸ J. ASSMANN, *Pamięć kulturowa...*, p. 68.

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 67.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 68.

Imitating the hymn in Polish literature can be traced by referring to its content. Most important are the representations of the dogma of Incarnation, the ideas of presenting Annunciation and Visitation. In Polish Marian songs we can also find plenty of Marian names, taken from litany tradition – *Sedes Sapientiae*, The Throne of Wisdom (The Seat of wisdom), The Queen of Angels, Queen of Heaven, The Morning Star, which never goes down (*Stella matutina*, The Morning Star, The Sea Star), *Virgo clemens* – gentle, tender face of Mary and *amabilis* – worth of love. These names present on one hand, the intimacy of Mother and Child and, on the other hand, the tender, emotional contact between Mother of God and the faithful. Such imagery of the Mother of God is presented, for example, in the song *Zdrowaś, królowno wyborna...*⁴¹, which is attributed to blessed Ladislav from Gielniowo⁴² or in *Mocne Boskie tajemności...*⁴³, where the form „lutościwa i miłościwa” (ang. merciful and loving) is presented in many variants. Each song represents another way of using the value of *Akathist*, but it's most readable in the Polish song *O przenasławniejsza Panno czysta...*

This song comes from the second part of the 15th century and was recorded by Waclaw Maciejowski in *Pamiętniki o dziejach, piśmiennictwie i prawodawstwie Słowian...* with title *Hymn do Najsświętszhey Panny*⁴⁴. He gave this manuscript a date – 1493 year. It might be the year, when the manuscript was written. But we don't know either the place, or the cultural environment in which this song has been created.

The song is divided into four parts similar to *stasis* in the *Akathist*. Every part starts with apostrophe: 'O przenasławniejsza Panno czysta', 'O zrządzenie Boga wszechmocnego', 'O królowno niebieska, nade wszystkie święta' and 'O anielska pani, Panno nad pannami'. This four parts of song have different topics, but each one shows Mary's participation in the Salvation, as in the Orthodox hymn.

⁴¹ This song was found by Aleksander Brückner. He attributed it to blessed Ladislav from Gielniowo and connected it with Bernardine circle.

⁴² Order of the Franciscans was brought to Poland by John of Capistrano in 1453. Ladislav from Gielniowo, the most important author of Polish Marian songs, derives from this order. Other Bernardine preachers followed his example. Songs in Polish were sung after the sermon instead of Latin psalms. The role of Bernardines in creating Polish songs (especially – Marian ones) is considered revolutionary. For more details see: W. WYDRA, *Władysław z Gielniowa. Z dziejów średniowiecznej poezji polskiej*, Poznań 1992, *passim*.

⁴³ This song is also connected with Bernardine circle. It was created in 15th century. Two versions of this song are noted. One was published by Waclaw Maciejowski in *Pieśni łysogórskie*. The second one is in collection of The National Library in Warsaw, 3347, k. 12-13 *verso*.

⁴⁴ W.A. MACIEJOWSKI, *Pamiętniki o dziejach, piśmiennictwie i prawodawstwie Słowian. Jako dodatek do historii prawodawstw słowiańskich przez siebie napisaney*, Petersburg–Lipsk 1839, p. 373-375.

First two parts of text concern the Incarnation dogma, because it's also, as in *Akathist*, an essence of this song. The first part focuses on presenting Mary as a Virgin. Here is also mentioned the Annunciation, but in theological aspect.

Matką Bożą zrzędzona
 Z Ducha Świętego
 I na wieki wieczne przeżegnana
 Dla płodu twego przenaszlachetniejszego⁴⁵

Mary became the Mother of God because of Holy Spirit's action. He allows the Incarnation and Mary becomes a gate for Christ. Another motive from the *Akathist* – a presence of the Saviour makes His Mother blessed. Also this point of view is presented in the *Akathist* and reflects the Orthodox way of seeing Annunciation, perceived as a mystical agreement preceding the Nativity.

Both texts also demonstrate similar sensibilities and attitude towards Mary's purity. That's why in Polish song this motive is located in the first verse and becomes the main theme of the whole structure of the text. Both texts also elevate Mary and position her higher than angels in the heavenly hierarchy. It's an important image which portrays the Mother of God as a Sophia – God's Wisdom. In Polish song it's said directly: 'Nad anjoły Panno jesteś powyzszona'.

There is also structural reference to *Akathist* in the first part of Polish song, because it's built of two strophes. There is a dialogue between them, as it used to be between *kondakion* and *ikos*. The first one is about the Incarnation and purity and the second – about divinity of the Mother of God. First, as it was in the first part of *Akathist* says everything about physical aspect of relations between Mother and Son, and the second, as it was in the second part of the *Akathist* – everything about mystical relations between them. Mary was always the Mother of God. Before her living in *profanum*, she had been already chosen, blessed among women:

Pirwej, niżliś stworzona, ty jeś w bostwie była
 I w świętości jesteś ji nosiła

It's a transition from being blessed to being holy. That's why Mary, because of her purity, which allows Incarnation, might become holy in the moment of the Nativity.

The second part of the Polish song provides another perspective of Incarnation. This part starts with words: 'O dziwne zrzędzenie Boga wszechmocnego'. The es-

⁴⁵ *Średniowieczna pieśń religijna polska*, ed. W. Korolko, Wrocław 2005, p. 150.

sence of this part is Christ's taking a body from Mary. It's a paradox of this dogma – Creator must take a body, if He wants to be born. And this dialogue of Christ's and Mary's perspectives is specific to the *Akathist as well*. It's also a reference to God's conception – existence in two dimensions. In eternity, where Mother of God was chosen and the Holy Spirit caused the conception; and in temporal reality, in the earthly sphere, where the Saviour is taking a body from Mary and being born as a Christ.

The third and fourth part of the Polish song are closely related to each other as well. In both fragments Mary is shown as a protector. At the beginning, the phrase 'O królowno niebieska, nade wszyscy święta' points to the idea of intercession, but in the last part – Mary is an orant, who is asking for grace for its worshippers.

Mary's intercession is validated in this song, because it's said, that she was connected with the holy sphere. She is referred to as the Queen of Heaven and adored by Holy Trinity. That's why Mary is a hope for salvation. Everyone, who needs her Son's grace, is asking His Mother for intercession. Because she is the Mother of Mercy and Our Lady of Grace. Mother of all worshippers. The references to *Akathist* are seen here, especially to twelve *ikos*. Its litany has similar structure. At first the Mother of God is given many names, connected with the holy sphere. She is called Tent of God and Word, or Ark gilded with Holy Spirit. Then she is presented as the Mother of Church with names: Glory of priests, Church's Bastion. In the end of this *ikos* she is mentioned as a protector of worshippers, who are victorious over fallen enemies. She is the medicine for body and soul saver.

In fourth part of the Polish song Mary is presented as an orant, that is in a manner similar to representations from Early Christian catacombs. Worshippers are asking her for intercessory prayer, so that she would obtain '[...] na tym świecie Bożą łaskę [...]' and 'po śmierci wieczną radość [...]'. Mother of God can offer help and serve as a foundation, but she also offers a guarantee of eternal life. This motive is expressed in a similar way in the r in Orthodox hymn. Mostly in the last, thirteenth kondakion, where Mother of God is asked to receive whole *Akathist* as a laudatory gift. In exchange for this hymn she should protect worshippers from any miseries and take off from them future punishment. This motive is reflected in iconography – in the *deesis*. We can feel the connection between these verses and the ending of *Bogurodzica*, which is a literary representation of the *deesis* theme⁴⁶.

The fate of akathist icon in Poland is not necessarily connected with direct adaptation of this motif and its use in the liturgical context. In this sense, Poland is

⁴⁶ R. MAZURKIEWICZ, *Deesis. Idea wstawiennictwa Bogarodzicy i św. Jana Chrzciciela w kulturze średniowiecznej*, Kraków 2002, p. 45.

not different from for example Moldova or the Balkans. Such images only affected the shape and specific character of Polish art. This influence is clear and visible mainly in the East of the country. However, due to the fact that Polish ruler often expressed Orthodox sympathies, the Lesser Poland region was influenced by this tradition. Especially during the reigns of Władysław II Jagiełło and Casimir IV Jagiellon. Well known for their artistic foundations such as the mural decoration of the Holy Trinity castle chapel in Lublin and the Holy Cross Chapel in Wawel Cathedral as well as other⁴⁷.

The Lesser Poland was heavily influenced by Ruthenian and Byzantine art, but this contact was mediated by Italian environment. *Via Italiana*, especially through Venice, was an important path for culture and art. In the whole of Europe. The Italy was from the early Romanesque period under strong influence of Byzantine culture. The Italian path provided the Lesser Poland painting with imports from this artistic circle. In this context, the actions of queens Elisabeth of Hungary and Jadwiga of Poland were particularly important. They brought with them some foreign images and gave them to Polish churches in Kraków.

The adaptation of akathist icon's motives in Polish Gothic art is based, as it was in the case of Marian literature, not on the direct acquisition of iconography or specific patterns. It can be rather described as borrowing of few stylistic elements, some formal or structural adaptations and some artistic connections.

This reference in Poland is most readable in the circle of Lesser Poland's painting, particularly in the Gothic *Hodegetria* group, commonly referred to as The Piekarskie Madonnas. These images received this name not after their eldest example but after the best known, the most widespread picture in this iconographic type⁴⁸. This group appeared in the south of Poland due to the copying of an unpreserved original pattern – an image, which had come due to cultural path – *Via Italiana*. Probably – this picture was perceived as miraculous⁴⁹. We can find images from the group of Piekarskie Madonnas in the Dominican monastery in Krakow and in the parish churches in Rudawa, Jakubowice, Kęty, Skalnik and Wojtkowice

⁴⁷ For details see: A. RÓŻYCKA-BRYZEK, *Bizantyńsko-ruskie malowidła ścienne w kaplicy św. Trójcy na zamku w Lublinie. Zagadnienie ikonografii*, [in:] „Sprawozdania z Posiedzeń Komisji Naukowych Oddziałów PAN w Krakowie” 1972, p. 458-460 and A. RÓŻYCKA-BRYZEK, *Bizantyńsko-ruskie malowidła ścienne w kaplicy Świętokrzyskiej na Wawelu*, [in:] „Studia do Dziejów Wawelu” 1968, vol. 3, p. 175-293.

⁴⁸ B. DĄB, T. MROCZKO, *Gotyckie Hodegetrie polskie*, [in:] *Średniowiecze. Studia o kulturze*, vol. III, Wrocław 1966, p. 32.

⁴⁹ J. GADOMSKI, *Gotyckie malarstwo tablicowe Malopolski. 1420-1470*, Warszawa 1981, p. 53-54.

Kościelne⁵⁰. The image of Piekarska Madonna was also included in left panel of the reliquary kept in the treasury of the Wawel cathedral. The picture from the church in Jakubowice is the earliest in the group – it dates from 1440-1450⁵¹. These images were still popular in Poland in the 17th and even 18th century and served as expressions and focus of individual devotion. From the 16th century this type of Madonna was popular also in the Greater Poland region⁵². Overall, this group has more than thirty objects⁵³.

Hodegetria, as it was said, it is the centre of akathist icon and the individual scenes presenting each motives, which appeared in Orthodox hymn, are put around this central representation. In Lesser Poland's painting, it is possible to find similar compositions. *Hodegetrias* were positioned within simple altar settings. They are quite small – their height is 100-125 cm and width is 70-85 cm⁵⁴. Unfortunately the original altar compositions from churches in Jazowsko, Jakubowice and Kęty, are not preserved and only their central paintings, presenting the Mother and the Child (Polish Gothic *Hodegetrias*), survive to this day. We know however, the original look of these altars⁵⁵.

It is possible to make a structural parallel between akathist icon and altar setting with Piekarska Madonna in the middle of composition. Such setting was painted on one surface and it consisted of central representation and some other images – surrounding or flanking it. The smaller images were put within frames into panels (typical for Western painting) – analogously to structure of Orthodox icon.

Through this method the mnemonic idea of altar settings is presented. It refers to the form of memory tradition, to the canon. It repeats well known iconographic compositions of Marian images but, because of the importance of the *Hodegetria* image type, the focus is always on the representation of the Incarnation dogma, based on the relations between Mother and Son. By that means the main message of the *Akathist hymn to the Blessed Virgin Mary* is Adapted and presented in a novel Latin context.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, p. 54.

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 113.

⁵² B. DĄB, T. MROCZKO, *Gotyckie Hodegetrie...*, p. 63.

⁵³ Ibidem, p. 48.

⁵⁴ J. GADOMSKI, *Gotyckie malarstwo...*, p. 77.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 77-78.

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AKATYST KU CZCI BOGURODZICY
I POLSKIE PIEŚNI MARYJNE
W KONTEKŚCIE PRAKTYK PERFORMATYWNYCH W TRADYCJI LITANIJNEJ

Streszczenie

Przedmiotem artykułu jest *Akatyst ku czci Bogurodzicy*, który, wraz z towarzyszącą mu ikoną, stanowił jeden z istotnych składników maryjnego kultu prawosławnego, oddziałując również poza granice prawosławia, między innymi na ziemię polskie. Celem tekstu nie jest opracowanie monografii tego zjawiska, a, koncentrując się na rozpoznaniu jego złożonej charakterystyki medialnej, badanie różnych form wykonania i zwrócenie szczególnej uwagi na aspekt performatywności. Charakterystyka

ta ma za zadanie wydobycie złożonych funkcji, jakie pełnił *Akatyst*, służąc celom pamięci – również mającej charakter niejednorodny, różnie się realizującej i pełniącej odmienne role. Analiza włącza w zakres zainteresowań wybrane pola badawcze – historię literatury, religii, kultury ujętej w perspektywie przemian mediów słowa a także historię sztuki.

Druga część artykułu pokazuje analogiczne zjawiska w polskiej pieśni maryjnej i tropi jej związki z *Akatystem ku czci Bogurodzicy*. W sposób szczegółowy poddana została opracowaniu pieśń *O przenasławniejsza panno czysta...* Struktura ikony akatystowej znalazła zaś odzwierciedlenie w gotyckich małopolskich nastawach ołtarzowych, w których umieszczone centralnie wyobrażenie Matki Boskiej w typie Madonny Piekarskiej otoczone było innymi przedstawieniami.

Kluczowym pojęciem dla artykułu staje się tradycja litanijna rozumiana tu szeroko – od określonych formuł językowych, przez strategię komunikacji, kwestie uobecniania, formuły mnemoniczne, aż po idee relacji przestrzennych, ruch i wykonanie – performance. Konkluzją tekstu jest próba zdefiniowania wieloaspektowości tego zjawiska, ze szczególnym zwróceniem uwagi na dynamikę tej tradycji, potrzebę działania i przywoływania za pomocą pamięci.

Słowa kluczowe: Akatyst; pieśń maryjna; litania; ikona; pamięć.

THE AKATHIST HYMN TO THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY
AND POLISH MARIAN SONGS
IN CONTEXT OF PERFORMATIVE PRACTICES IN LITANY TRADITION

Summary

The article analyses *Akatyst ku czci Bogurodzicy* [Akathist to the Mother of God], which, together with the accompanying icon, was one of the important components of the Marian Orthodox cult, whose influence went beyond the Orthodox Church, affecting among others also Polish lands. The aim of the article is not to develop a monograph on this phenomenon, but, focusing on the recognition of its complex media characteristics, to study various forms of its performance and to pay special attention to the performativity aspect. The purpose of this characterization is to bring out the complex functions that the Akathist performed, serving the purposes of memory – having also a heterogeneous character, realised in various ways and playing different roles. The analysis encompasses selected research fields – history of literature, religion and culture from the perspective of changes in the media of words, as well as art history.

The second part of the article shows analogous phenomena in the Polish Marian song and traces its relations to the *Akhatist to the Mother of God*. In particular, the analysis focuses on the song *O przenasławniejsza panno czysta...* The structure of the akhatist icon was reflected in the Gothic altar stands in Lesser Poland, in which the image of the Virgin Mary of the type of Madonna Piekarska was centrally placed, surrounded by other representations.

The key concept for the article is the litany tradition, which is understood here broadly, i.e. including specific language formulas, the communication strategy, issues of presence, mnemonic formulas, the ideas of spatial relations, movement and performance. In conclusion, the article attempts to define the multi-aspectual character of this phenomenon, with particular focus on the dynamics of this tradition, the need to act and recall using memory.

Keywords: Akhatist; Marian song; litany; icon; memory.

Summary translated by Rafał Augustyn