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GREEK AND ROMAN MOTIFS IN THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE POLISH-LITHUANIAN COMMONWEALTH

Inspirations, Influences, References

ABSTRACT: This article analyses the inspiration for the characters and motifs originating from Greek and Roman mythology in the mythical origin stories of Poland and Lithuania (since 1569 the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth). The founding fathers of these states – Lech and Palemon – were often compared to Remus and Romulus, French Faramund or British Brutus of Troy. The most extensive use of antique motifs was made by Jan Skorski, the author of an epic poem about Lech created in 1745. The poet was inspired above all by the *Aeneid* and the *Odyssey*. The use of antique motifs by Polish chroniclers and poets was in turn an inspiration for the nobility, who were also “searching” (a better word would be: creating) for their antique roots.

KEYWORDS: Greek Mythology; Roman Mythology; Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, 15th–18th centuries

Greek and Roman mythologies have inspired many creators since antiquity: artists, poets, playwrights, sculptors, but also writers of historical works. The line between literature and history in these works was intangible, hence the medieval chronicles and poems of many Western European countries which, identifying with Greco-Roman civilization, included myths that took their origins from antiquity. The most popular theme was, of course, the Trojan War,¹ which was mainly referred to by the inhabitants of Italy, but also those of France and the British Isles. During the Middle Ages the Western European community had a shared past. At the dawn of the Renaissance, “younger Europe,” including Poland and Lithuania, began to search passionately for its roots, in order first and foremost to catch up and feel equal with the Western countries. For this reason, historians began to create what at the time would have seemed probable, or plausible, stories regarding the origins of states,² which would allow them to be part of the great family of states of Greco-Roman civilization. Even if it was not possible to “find”

¹ Gert Melville (1987, 427-29) treated the Trojan War as “the cradle of Europe;” see also Wulf (2009).

² A brief analysis of the origin myths of the Slavs (Poland, Ruthenia and Bohemia) is given in Forycki (2011).

ancestors from the Trojan War or Roman times, motifs well known from Greco-Roman mythology were used.

It should be emphasized that the Kingdom of Poland and the Great Duchy of Lithuania, forming the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1569, had separate myths of origin. The founding fathers of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were, respectively, Lech and Publius Libon, also called Palemon in historiography. Lech was a Slav; he came to the Polish territory from the Balkans in the sixth century. Palemon arrived in Lithuania from ancient Rome. The choice of an ancient patrician as founder was carefully considered – Lithuania wanted to emphasize that its affiliation with Latin civilization not only predated Poland's (so that it would be treated as an equal partner before the signing of the Act of Union in Lublin in 1569), but also – or perhaps above all – that of Muscovy, which had been trying to incorporate the Lithuanian lands into its sphere of influence from as early as the Middle Ages. Therefore, the idea of a Roman predecessor had a mainly propagandistic significance.³

Both Lech and Palemon were compared to Greek and Roman mythological heroes. They were most often juxtaposed with Romulus, specifically in that they too founded cities that became future capitals of new states: Poland and Lithuania. Philosopher Sebastian Petrycy of Pilzno (1554-1626), in his masterly Polish translations of Aristotle's philosophical works, wrote some of his own thoughts. In one such addition, Petrycy equated Lech with other European rulers, all of whom were compared with Romulus as a means of confirming the legitimacy of the political system in Poland – the monarchy: "In the Roman state Romulus was the ruler of all. The French from Faramund, the Spanish from Athanaric, the English from Brutus [of Troy], Poles from Lech, Swedes from Magog" (Petrycy 1979, 110). Similarly, as with Romulus, they lent their names to states, cities, or regions. Poland was previously called Lechia (though mainly in the Middle Ages), and its inhabitants were known as Lechites. On the other hand, the name of the capital of Lithuania – Vilnius – was derived from the earliest version of the story of the country's foundation, in which Palemon is referred to as Vilius (this name, however, appeared in the chronicle of Jan Długosz in the fifteenth century and in a work that was popular in Western Europe, *Tractatus de duabus Sarmatiis Europiana et Asiana* written by Maciej Miechowita in 1517). Similarly, the name of the state as a whole was supposed to indicate a Roman origin; it initially supposed to be "Lithalia," with only the letter "l" being added to "Italia" (Długosz 1981, 215). In subsequent historiographical works, however, Vilius "changed" his name to Publius Libon, and also turned out to be the founder of "Libonia," (Livonia).

However, it was not only Romulus to whom Lech and Palemon were compared. The motif of a journey was used in the foundation stories of Poland and Lithuania, which is why the stories of Aeneas or Odysseus (Ulysses) were also recalled. Above all, the journey of the latter was used in the myth of Palemon, because he too sailed, in his case from Rome to the shores of the Baltic Sea. In fact, the very change of name in the

³ For the Lithuanian origin myth, and especially the figure of Palemon, see Orzeł (2018).

historiographical works and literature (especially poems) the sixteenth century from Vilius to Palemon shows that the intention was to emphasise the ancient connotations (in this case Greek), because Palemon (also called Melicertes) is after all a god who protects sailors – the “guardian of ships,” as Euripides wrote about him in *Iphigeneia in Tauris* (Euripides 1938):

When we were driving the cattle, that feed in the forest, into the sea that flows through the Symplegades, there was a broken cleft, hollowed by the constant surge of waves, shelter for those who hunt the purple-fish. Here one of the herdsmen saw two youths, and made a retreat on tip-toe. He said: ‘Don't you see them? These are deities that sit there.’ One of us, who revered the gods, lifted up his hands and prayed, as he saw them: “O son of the sea-goddess Leukothea, *guardian of ships, lord Palaemon*, be propitious to us! Or do you sit on our shores, twin sons of Zeus? Or the darlings of Nereus, father of the chorus of fifty Nereids?” (260-70; emphasis added)

In the chronicle of the sixteenth century by Maciej Strykowski, who focused on presenting the most ancient “history” of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Palemon was compared to many figures from Greek and Roman mythology, especially to other founders: to Jason, who established Aquileia with the Argonauts; to Dido, who built Carthage; to Aeneas, who gave birth to Padua; to Ulysses, who founded Lisbon; and to Brutus of Troy, the founder of London (then *Troia Nova*) (Strykowski 1846, 70, 71, 76-9). Strykowski took most of these references from the works of Virgil and his *Aeneid*. Nevertheless, the father of the Polish Kingdom was also compared to Jason (Strykowski 1846, 70). In his case, the Golden Fleece he brought to the Polish lands was “golden freedom,” i.e. the privileges enjoyed by knights, and later on in the early modern period by the nobility.

Strykowski also used the motif of the Roman she-wolf who fed Remus and Romulus. This, however, was with regard to a real ruler, the Grand Duke of Lithuania from the fourteenth century: Gediminas. Having defeated the Teutonic Order, he captured Trakai, where he established the capital of the grand dukes. Having done so, however, he continued his journey west. At one point, tired, he fell asleep. In his dream he saw a hundred wolves howling. His soothsayer explained that this was a sign that a great city would be built at that location, known all over the world (Strykowski 1846, 370)⁴ – like Rome. Gediminas listened to the fortune teller and founded Vilnius, where he moved the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from Trakai. The prophetic dream also has parallels with mythological heroes – not only Odysseus, but also Brutus of Troy, both of whom during their journeys had miraculous dreams that led them to their own promised lands.

The mythical origin stories of Poland and Lithuania were formed before the previously-mentioned Union of Lublin, signed in 1569. After that time, they were propagated, especially in schools. Education in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was the domain of monastic orders, first of the Jesuits and then of the Piarists. In their colleges the nobility learnt and deepened their knowledge of, above all, rhetoric. Literary,

⁴ An extensive analysis of this topic has been carried out by Antoniewicz (2009, 179-93).

mythological, but also historical references were therefore comprehensible to the noblemen, especially given that the Polish-Lithuanian nobility had a particularly favourable attitude to Greco-Roman antiquity; above all, they felt themselves to be the heirs to the Roman Empire.

The readability of the references is obvious if we look at those that occur in literature. In the already well-established Polish origin myth, Lech was seen as the prototype for the Poles, just as Aeneas was for the Italians. It is inevitable, therefore, that a *Lechiad* needed to be written – following the example of the *Aeneid* of Virgil or the more modern *Franciad* (1572) by Pierre Ronsard. Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski (1595-1640, also known as *Horatius Sarmaticus* or *Horatius Christianus*), writing in the first half of the seventeenth century, created the epic poem *Lechiad*. Unfortunately, only a fragment of the eleven hymns has survived, glorifying the founder of Poland and his knights, who were not only willing to fight in tournaments, but were also humble towards their ruler (Sarbiewski 1980, 569-70). Nevertheless, Sarbiewski inspired other writers. In 1655, another Jesuit (and Sarbiewski's pupil) Albert Ines wrote *Lechias. Ducum, principum ac regum Poloniae ab usq[ue] Lecho deductorum elogia historico-politica et panegyres lyricae*, in which Lech introduces a catalogue of Polish rulers to whom a laudatory ode was dedicated. The works of Albert Ines belonged to the literary canon in Jesuit schools (Puchowski 1999, 72, 81), and was popular among the Polish and Lithuanian nobility given its numerous editions: first in 1655 and then in 1680, 1713 and 1733.

The most popular “Lechiad” is the epic poem *Lechus, carmen heroicum* by the Jesuit Jan Skorski (1701-52) in 1745, which was translated into Polish by Benedykt Kotficki in 1751. It was probably intended to popularise the myth of Lech among the less educated (unfamiliar with Latin) part of Polish-Lithuanian society. Composed of twelve books, modelled on the *Aeneid*, the *Lechiad* was intended, via the presentation of the fate of the nation's founder, to grace all of its subsequent history. Also in the invocation to the Muse, Skorski points out that she makes sure that European cities “preserve the memory of Aeneas, Priam and Troy” (Skorski 1745, 6).

In this epic poem, Lech is compared to Jason, Aeneas, and Ulysses, but also to Moses, giving the people – his subjects – his laws written down on tablets. This is a new comparison, but not a surprising one given the religious society of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Skorski was the only one author to figure out how to connect Lech's journey with the *Odyssey*. In book 1, he describes how Lech, before his journey to Poland, sailed towards the Isthmus of Corinth to rescue his kidnapped daughter. An important role in this journey is played by Lech's adversary Saginvida, the personification of envy (Latin: *saga invida*, simply called *Invidia* – Envy), often appearing in ancient poetry, including Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, 2, 760-809) and Virgil (*Georgics* III, 37-9), but here she is, like Juno, driven by aversion to Aeneas (Szymański 2012, 264). Saginvida persuades the Sirens to lead Lech and his companions to perdition. However, one of the Sirens, Parthenope (whose tomb, according to Strabon, was in Naples), predicted that Lech would survive the danger and one day establish a new state. Later on in the epic poem, tempted by their

beautiful singing, Lech swims up to the Sirens, who sing their songs to put sailors to sleep. Most of them have peculiar dreams concerning gold, but Lech has a prophetic dream in which he sees an assembly of the Roman gods (with Jupiter as chairman), who meet to decide his fate (Skorski 1745, 15-28). Among them is Pallas (Athena), who pleads with Jupiter on Lech's behalf. In turn, just as in the *Aeneid*, the Jupiter comforts Venera by presenting to her the fate of Aeneas and the future power of the Romans, here he reassures Athena by describing the successful future of Lech and the state he is to found (Pilch 1916, 104). Jupiter's words obviously come true – in book 6, Lech establishes Gniezno, the future first real capital of Poland. In the description of the newly-founded city, one can see a similarity to motifs used by Virgil, both in the description of the construction of Carthage and the later circuses (Skorski 1745, 137-53).

In the last book, Saginvida reappears, wanting to destroy Lech again. This time she requests help from her sister Sagalicia – the personification of swagger and disobedience. Sagalicia causes an argument between the people living by the Vistula River (Vandals) and the people who came to the Polish lands with Lech. However, he manages to end the dispute peacefully. A symbolic scene then ensues: sat in a triumphal carriage, Lech enters the temple of Mars at Wawel (Skorski 1745, 314-26), where the Royal Castle is later built in what is to become the second capital of Poland.

Interestingly, although only Lech features in the epic poem's title, Skorski also mentions – in a very prophetic dimension – Palemon, the founder of Lithuania. In book 7, Palemon sends a messenger to Lech with a proposal of both friendship and a merger with Lechia (as mentioned, this was the popular name for Poland in medieval times), and that the newly created state should be ruled by one monarch. Lech of course agrees to this (Skorski 1745, 328-31). The story thus sanctioned the future real-life union between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

Just as Aeneas was presented as a model Roman (characterised by valour and piety), so Lech is a prototype of a Pole: extremely courageous, pious, but above all freedom-loving – the highest value on earth (Pilch 1916, 111). Obviously, "freedom" here really means the liberty of the nobility in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the privileges that came with it: golden freedom, the election of kings and *liberum veto*. These symbols of the Polish-Lithuanian political system also appear in the last book of Skorski's epic poem.

Of the many references motifs from Greek and Roman mythologies in the literature of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, they are most evident in Skorski's work. He used many symbols: among them are Odysseus, Aeneas, Sirens, Jupiter, Athena taking care of Lech, Mars, and even funeral customs, or those performed during sacrifice. For readers of this work – the Polish and Lithuanian nobility – these references would have been understandable. Moreover, they certainly would have boosted the nobility's ego insofar as Lech was compared in a literary manner with great ancient heroes. They were also an inspiration, because Greco-Roman mythology was referenced not only in state myths but also in the myths of individual noble families.

The coat of arms was something exceptional, because it distinguished the nobility from other social classes in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. However, despite the formal equality of the nobility, with time they began to “compete” for the most ancient origins, because this was supposed to increase the prestige of a particular house or family. Political and social ambitions were complemented by the Old Polish nobility’s worship of antiquity – mainly Roman. In every century from the sixteenth to the eighteenth, the number of coats of arms supposedly dating back to antiquity increased, as did the number of legends or stories about the circumstances of acquiring a coat of arms.

One of the most prominent heraldists from the sixteenth century, Bartosz Paprocki (c. 1540-1614) claimed that the Korab coat of arms had its origins in Neptune, shortly after the creation of the world. This is again an interesting combination of Christian and mythological imagery. In turn, in armorials written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, noble families using the Łabędź (English: Swan) coat of arms explained the origin of their symbol in different ways. On the one hand, it was believed that the most ancient ancestor of noblemen using the Łabędź coat of arms was Heracles, who was said to have a swan motif on his shield. On the other hand, ancestors were found from the time of the Trojan War, although no specific figures were identified. In turn, the families using the Łódzia (Old Polish: Łódź, English: Boat) coat of arms could not decide on its ancestor – whether it was Jason sailing to Colchis, or Theseus.⁵

The nobility from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth willingly referred to Greek and Roman mythology. They did so firstly because they considered themselves to be a part of Latin civilisation; secondly, because they felt they were a continuation of the Roman Republic (due to the large role of the democratic element within a mixed monarchy). Thirdly, Greco-Roman mythology was used by historians in the creation of stories about the origins of the Polish and Lithuanian states, especially in the comparisons of the founding fathers to mythological figures, and in the use of the same motifs (especially journeys, prophetic dreams, the founding of a city or state and naming it after oneself). Fourthly, national epic poems were created which enthusiastically propagated these contents, which in turn were transferred to the armorials.

⁵ On the fantasy of the Polish nobility in inventing founders for their coats of arms from ancient times, see the work of Orzeł (2016, 103-5) and Lewandowski (1981, 227-46).

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