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Elements of the ancient world in the chronicles by Cosmas of Prague and Gallus Anonymus

Abstract

The article shows the way in which two medieval chroniclers: Gallus Anonymous and Cosmas of Prague include elements of ancient world into their narrations. Both *Chronica Boemorum* by Cosmas and Gallus' *Cronica et gesta ducum sive principum Polonorum* refer to the Bible and ancient pagan literature. The author of the article presents similarities and differences of this method of the use of predecessors' heritage. One of similarities is the natural and unconstrained style which both writers used to imagine the ancient world. The most important difference is the fact that Cosmas refers to antiquity more frequently and widely than Gallus. The author also underlines that the Prague canon was closer to another chronicler of Polish history – Wincenty Kadłubek – in his approach to threads and motives of antiquity.

Key words: Cosmas of Prague, Gallus Anonymous, historiography, medieval chronicle writing, ancient motives.

Introduction

In every epoch artists are inspired both by their surrounding reality and the pre-existing products of a given culture. The repeatability of motifs in European literature is a well-recognised topic (Curtius 1997: 86–153; Auerbach 1968: I, 78–79, II, 422–428). Every writer, beginning from antiquity and finishing in contemporary times, to some extent has

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mimed or copied other works of art or incorporated into their works elements or motifs functioning in their cultural setting. In their works, to some extent, consciously or unconsciously, they referred to the works of their predecessors. Sometimes their aim was to evoke particular associations with other characteristic or widely-known motif or literary work. In that way, their own work obtained an additional dimension of meaning. Not rarely such references occurred unconsciously, casually, in the shape of elements drawn from a given writer's erudition, from literary motifs and themes functioning in their cultural environment and from the works of other artists studied earlier.

This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in the Middle Ages. The authors of that epoch willingly referred in their writings to the legacy of the past. They were keen on coping earlier patterns, and in their texts incorporated fragments attributed to their predecessors. Literary independence was not valued. The willingness to imitate ancient authors and respect for their authority were characteristic features of mediaeval writing. A mediaeval chronicle was more a literary than a historical work and often referred to poetic forms, especially to narrative literature (Michałowska 1995: 103–106). The aim of this article is to present the similarities and differences in the method of the use of ancient writers' works by two mediaeval chroniclers: Gallus Anonymus and Cosmas of Prague. By the analysis of the texts of the chronicles the author of the article tries to show characteristic – for each of writers – methods of including quotations and analogies of Bible and ancient Roman writers' works into their writings.

Gallus Anonymus, the author of the first Polish national chronicle was a subject of interest many times by researchers (Mrozowicz 2017: 453–482). This chronicler very rarely referred directly to pagan or biblical originals (Maleczyński 1934: 54–58; Plezia 1947: 122–128; Kras 2002: 5–32; Skibiński 2012: 345–359; Chmielewska 2017: 193–210). He did not quote Roman poets, his narrative patterns were not numerous and not clearly discernible. Cosmas, the father of Bohemian historiography displayed a different approach – his chronicle abounds with numerous borrowings from the Bible and ancient pagan authors (Třeštík 1968: 67–96; Nechutová 2000: 67–73; Bláhová 2003: 16–28). Many fragments from his chronicle inspired by ancient authors are certainly changed, but many of them are faithful quotes from Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Lucan, Persius, Statius or Boethius. Information on works which Cosmas drew from can be found in all subsequent editions and translations into Czech of Cosmas's chronicle. This problem is also touched by other researchers (Kolář 1924: 21–99; Sadílek 2001: 65–74, 121–130; Wolverton 2015: 51–80).

Not all references to ancient literature occurring in the works of mediaeval authors were based on direct message. A substantial part of ancient authors widely known and read in the Middle Ages was studied by analysing their complete works or long excerpts. Some of them, however, became familiar to mediaeval writers somehow indirectly. This epoch was also the time of florilegia, i.e. excerpts containing fragments of ancient and mediaeval authors' works, collections of sayings and quotes.

Cosmas of Prague and Gallus Anonymus and the Bible

All mediaeval writers were people of the Church and very willingly quoted the authority of the Bible. Bible studies constituted a crucial part of mediaeval students' education. Both biblical and patristic content accompanied students from the very first stages of their education. The Bible functioned at that time not only as the foundation of faith for an ordinary man, but it was also the basic read for an educated layer of society. The Bible was read, commented on and made the theme of scholarly disputes (Banaszkiewicz 1979: 66–77; Deptuła 1990: 76–87). It constituted a precious source of beautiful expressions and sophisticated metaphors and was an inexhaustible set of examples for various events, situations and human behaviour (Wielgus 1990: 75–139, 213–216, 278–359; Leclercq 1997: 87–108; Bardski 2009: 37–53). Such a reference elevated every work. One should also remember that for people connected with the Church, and only such people were writing at that time, particular books of the Bible were also their basic “working tool,” their everyday reading, their daily necessity thanks to which they were able to compose their own texts in Latin (Plezia 1947: 29). Not all Books of the Scripture were known to the same degree by all clergymen, however, the Bible remained in the very centre of the mediaeval religious thought; it was the most important written text of the mediaeval world (Brookes 1984: 130).

Biblical reminiscences and school reading of the authors gave them a certain scope of historical and mythological knowledge and offered a set of concepts related to ancient culture. Let us see how our two chroniclers used that knowledge. Most frequently it served them as the source of characters used for comparisons or for making their writing more vivid. The chroniclers equally drew from two cultural circles – pagan antiquity and Judaeo-Christian civilisation.

An important ruler of mediaeval Bohemia was duke Bretislav I of Přemyslid dynasty (Krzemieńska 1999: 335–373). The Prague canon

compared duke Bretislav I to Achilles, Tethys and heroes of the Old Testament: Samson and Gideon, Joshua and Solomon (*Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum* 1923: 81) Achilles and Diomedes, son of Tydeus (as we talk about him), heroes of the Trojan War, symbolise valour and bravery. Gideon was a great winner as he defeated the Midianites and the Amalekites and freed the people of Israel (Judg 6–8). Joshua, the hero of the Book of Joshua, a judge of ancient Israel, was also a great warrior, a symbol of indomitability and fidelity (Josh 1–24). The comparison to Samson (Judg 13–16) is to emphasise Bretislav's exceptional physical strength. And Solomon, king of Israel, according to the biblical tradition, was famous for his wisdom (1 Kgs 1–11, 2 Chr 1–9.) It is also worth mentioning that Joshua, Samson and Gideon owed their power and strength to God, they were chosen by Him, favoured by God Almighty.

On the other hand, Cosmas depicted ruthless Bohemian duke Boleslaus in the following way: "[...] fuit inpius atque tyrannus, sevir Herede, truculentior Nerone, Decium superans scelerum inmanitate, Dioclecianum crudelitate [...]" (*Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum* 1923: 38). The chronicler refers here to religious persecutions. All of the mentioned rulers were presented as brutes in the Christian literature.. Herod the Great, king of Judea is presented in the evangelical tradition as a tyrant who wants to kill Jesus, the initiator of the so-called Massacre of the Innocents (Matt 2,16–18) and similarly Roman emperors, i.e. Nero, Diocletian and Decius are remembered in history as cruel rulers and persecutors of Christians.

In the *Polish Chronicle* by Gallus Anonymus we can find a comparison referring to Bolesław III Wrymouth. He was described several times as "the child of Mars" – "puer Martialis" (*Galli Anonymi cronicae* 1952: 67, 77, 78, 84, 86, 102). Mars is one of the most important gods of ancient Romans, the embodiment of bravery and valour. In another excerpt, while referring to Wrymouth's exceptional military skills, the chronicler compared this ruler to Maccabee brothers, the leaders of the Israeli revolt against the Hellenic invaders. Gallus writes about Bolesław, calling him "Machabeorum imitator". (*Galli Anonymi cronicae* 1952: 103) This association especially refers to the strategy used by the duke in two simultaneous campaigns against the Bohemians and the Pomeranians. The chronicler refers to a well-known biblical episode talking about the division of the Maccabean army and simultaneous battles fought by it in Gilead and Galilee (1 Macc 5, 9–36). Both this expression ("the follower of the Maccabees") and the former one ("son of Mars") coming from the chronicle by Gallus Anonymus were used by the second chronicler in the history of Poland – master Wincenty. Kadłubek also depicted Wrymouth

by using the epithet "child of Mars" – "puer Martis" (*Magistri Vincentii dicti Kadhubek Chronica* 1994: 71). Similarly, the expression "the follower of the Maccabees" – "Machabeorum imitator" (*Magistri Vincentii dicti Kadhubek Chronica* 1994: 74).

Chroniclers and the mythology of ancient Greece and Rome

Apart from the abovementioned examples quoted by the chroniclers, there are also skilful expressions of ancient, most frequently mythological origin. They embellish the chronicles and let their authors express a given thought in a poetic way. Cosmas presents military successful duke Wlaczlav as *semper* "Marte secundo [...] prevaluerat" (*Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum* 1923: 23), Přemysl with Libuše as "*Veneri et Himineo indulgent*" (*Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum* 1923: 18), whereas *Cereri et Bachi munera* means harvest from fields and vineyards (*Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum* 1923: 8, 18, 21). The life of Přemysl, the Bohemian progenitor ended when "raptus est ad Cereri generum" (*Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum* 1923: 21), whereas the life of his offspring Vnislav "rumpunt Parce" (*Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum* 1923: 21). In the chronicle by Gallus the same Parcae, goddesses of destiny, shortened the life of a very promising son of Bolesław II the Generous – Mieszko who died at the age of about 20 (*Galli Anonymi cronicae* 1952: 55). Parcae also occur in the *Polish Chronicle*, in the third book.

Some references to the world of pagan antiquity, like the said Parcae, occur in both analysed sources. It is true about the myth of the Golden Age known from the works by Hesiod and Ovid. It shows the vision of the world where a human being deteriorates gradually. Each subsequent era offers humanity more and more difficult living conditions. In the classic version presented by Ovid, the Golden Age is the time of peace, abundance and prosperity. It was followed by gradually worse and worse times: the Silver Age, the Bronze Age, and finally the Iron Age. Sometimes ancient literature offers the division into five epochs. Such a version was presented by Hesiod in (the book titled *Works and Days*). In the ancient mythology the most popular was definitely the division to four time periods (Kubusch 1987: 9–28; Grimal 1997: 263; Kubiak 1998: 89–93; Evans 2008: 39–80). Gallus used that motif to emphasise the contrast between the Golden Age of the reign of Bolesław II the Generous and the time after his death, which he calls the Lead Age (*Galli Anonymi cronicae* 1952:

37). The chronicler might have been inspired by *Metamorphoses* by Ovid.

In initial chapters of the first book Cosmas describes honest and righteous habits of people inhabiting the Bohemian land right after the time when mythical Czech and his people had settled down on this territory (*Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum* 1923: 9). Cosmas was inspired here by Boethius and his *De consolazione philosophiae*. The fifth rhyming metre from book III is fully devoted to the description of the idyllic times of humanity's first Golden Age. The Bohemian chronicler directly copied a few lines from this excerpt or only slightly changed the quotes: "quia amor habendi seivior ignibus Ethne in omnibus". The motif of the Golden Age and inevitable corruption of morals in further epochs was used by the Bohemian chronicler once again in the third book. Commenting on the ascension to the Prague throne by Bořivoj II, which violated the seniority rule in an unacceptable way, he wrote that "Tunc Cillenia delet omnino suo vestigia, que vix inpressa reliquerat in Boemia, cum exosa terras peteret celestia" (*Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum* 1923: 175–176). In this way he refers to the *Metamorphoses* by Ovid, where the poet mentions Astraea. Astraea (or Astrea, Astria) is the goddess of justice, innocence, purity. Astraea, the celestial virgin, was the last immortal creature who had lived with people since the time of the Golden Age. The goddess left the earth during the Iron Age, fleeing from new human vileness. Here, Cosmas calls her Cillenia.

Troy is a similar case. Numerous topics of Homer's poems were a constant element of ancient and mediaeval literature. Knowledge of Ancient Greek certainly was not common at that time; the lives of Homer's characters were known only cursorily using Latin texts (Mańkowski 1962: 139; Wolf 2009: 15–40). Troy, memory about it and its heroes fighting along its walls, immortalised by the poets' words, constitutes for Gallus a symbol of everlasting memory which can be assured only by the author and their work (*Galli Anonymi cronicae* 1952: 121; Wojtowicz 2018: 127–142). In the prologue to the third book, the Polish chronicler evokes the image of destroyed Troy immortalised by the poet's pen. The Bohemian chronicler in his work refers to particular fragments concerning the history of fighting and the capture of Ilium: Paris abducting his lady-love (*Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum* 1923: 73), the Trojan Horse as a synonym of deceit (*Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum* 1923: 183), and the burning of Troy, which is a symbol of a captured and plundered city (*Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum* 1923: 152).

Cosmas and ancient poetry

Cosmas was more willing than Gallus to make use of his knowledge of ancient literature and culture, and he did it more skilfully. He frequently incorporates excerpts of ancient poetry in his text. Let us look at a passage of book III. When he reached the conclusion that he had described all the events pertaining to the times of Přemysl the Ploughman, he put the following words in his work:

Sed quoniam omnibus
Ire quidem restat, Numa quo venit et Ancus

"To go where Numa and Ancus have gone," seen in the Bohemian chronicle (*Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum* 1923: 21) is an exact quotation from Horace's work (Horacjusz Flakkus 1988: II,281). Numa and Ancus from the poem are Numa Pompilius and Ancus Marcius, two just Roman kings. They left for the world of shadows, the world of the dead. Přemysl, like every man, is also to pass away. The Latin poet followed by Cosmas informs us about transience of this world and human fragility. The quote comes from a beautiful poem by Horace beginning with a known Pythagorean saying – "nil admirari" – i.e. nothing to admire and thus nothing to desire. Using that maxim ensures inner peace and independence from the outside world, indifference to emotions characteristic of Stoics. This passage was quoted very skilfully and in keeping with the ancient context.

As far as the way of drawing from the heritage of ancient literature is concerned, the Prague canon has more in common with the next Polish chronicler writing one hundred years later, namely with Master Wincenty called Kadłubek, than with Gallus. Master Wincenty quotes or paraphrases numerous Roman historians, philosophers and poets or excerpts from the Bible with great pleasure. In the *Polish Chronicle* by Master Wincenty we can find over three hundred different references to Roman or biblical ancient literature (Chmielewska 2003: 223–238). Ancient rethoric and philosophy was not foreign to him as well (Pawłowski 2003: 172–176; Kałuża 2014: 219–282). Both of them – Cosmas and Wincenty – were able to put an equation mark between local and world figures with one pertinent comparison. They did not have to use only a simple and very clear form of such a comparison and they did not need (as I have shown with the examples above) to name an important figure from their history like an ancient or biblical hero. They also did it much more subtly.

Chronica Boemorum about Krok, a legendary Bohemian ruler, contains a passage from the Book of Genesis (Gen 6.9) that describes Noah, one of patriarchs as “Vir fuit hic in suis generationibus ad unguem perfectus” (*Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum* 1923: 9) – “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation.” He could not have found a more appropriate comparison for the father of the nation! Cosmas uses equally favourable connotations to write about Krok’s predecessor, Pater Boemus. He was compared to a national Roman hero, Aeneas. Like Aeneas centuries previously, Boemus addresses his companions and recalls difficulties they experienced while looking for a new place for his people to settle (*Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum* 1923: 7; Virgil 1960: I, 254). This is how these passages appear in respective texts.

Cosmas – I, 2: O socii, non semel mecum graves labores per devia nemorum perpassi	Virgil – <i>Aen.</i> I, 198–199: O socii – neque enim ignari sumus ante malorum / O passi graviora, dabit deus his quoque finem
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Having found a good territory where he wished to settle, Boemus raised his hands to heaven and prayed to the gods. Virgil depicted Aeneas’s prayer in an exactly the same way (*Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum* 1923: 7; Virgil 1960: I, 246).

Cosmas – I, 2: surgens ac utrasque palmas tendens ad sydera	Virgil – <i>Aen.</i> I, 93: ingemit, et duplicis tendens ad sidera palmas
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Further on, the chronicler put into the predecessor’s mouth a paraphrase of the words uttered by Aeneas. Fleeing from Troy, he uttered them when he found the land where he and his companions were supposed to settle in accordance with the prophecies. Boemus does it when he wants to settle on the land, which was named Bohemia by his companions (*Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum* 1923: 7; Virgil 1960: II, 10).

Cosmas – I, 2: Salve, terra fatalis, mille vocis quesita nobis	Virgil – <i>Aen.</i> VII, 120: salve fatis mihi debita tellus
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In this way, two predecessors of the Bohemian nation – Boemus and Krok – became accepted into the group of eminent characters and thus, the origins of the Bohemian nation should be associated in the readers’ heads with the origins of other great nations.

Cosmas, similarly to Polish bishop Wincenty Kadłubek a century later, frequently made use of various works and ancient motifs in one theme of his story. He did it, for example, in the final chapter of the first book. *Amor omnia vincit, rex et dux cedit amanti* – by this paraphrase of Virgil the Bohemian chronicler begins his story of the passionate love of Bohemian duke Bretislav for the beautiful Judith of Schweinfurt (Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum 1923: 73; Virgil 1960: I, 74).

Cosmas – I, 40: Amor omnia vincit, rex et dux cedit amori	Virgil – <i>Ecl.</i> 10, 69: Omnia uincit Amor: et nos cedamus Amori.
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Judith was praised as the most beautiful woman in the world. The chronicler also used the expression *sub Phebo* – for a person versed in Greek mythology these are synonymous expressions. Phoebus is Apollo’s nickname under which he was worshipped as the god of the sun (Grimal 1997: 104). The growing feeling of the Bohemian ruler is described as caused by Venus’s son’s flame. Cupid, as he is hidden under this expression, is a god of love who inspired burning affection by his arrows. When finally Bretislav abducts Judith, he is compared by Cosmas to Paris who abducted Helen, Menelaus’s wife. And the smart way in which he did it makes the chronicler think about Odysseus with his intelligence and smartness. Cosmas refers here to Odysseus who was smart enough to recognise Achilles dressed up as a girl.

Conclusions

Gallus Anonymus and Cosmas use the heritage of the ancient world in many ways. They often juxtapose a character they depict with a vast array of historical and ancient literary heroes. With the help of various forms of comparisons and analogies they elevate or deprecate rulers, nobles or even the whole nation. For educated mediaeval writers, antiquity was a treasury of examples ready to use and, what is more important, completely intelligible to the readers. Referring to ancient literature, both authors also assumed a certain, quite high level of readers’

knowledge. It is worth emphasising the fact that many borrowings coming from very well-known pagan literary works or from the Bible are merely outlined. The chroniclers did not usually describe a given anecdote in detail, neither did they explain the origin of a quoted character. They assumed that a certain level of knowledge about ancient literature and culture should be incorporated in the canon of knowledge pertaining to every educated European at that time. It is also the case as far as excerpts referring to the Bible are concerned. The chroniclers expected the readers to be familiar with them and to comprehend the sense of a given fragment. Poetry quoted in the chronicles was to embellish them and give them a sophisticated literary form.

Gallus Anonymus did not put forward his wide reading, he did not try to hide his own views behind an ancient or mediaeval quote either. To achieve this aim, he would rather use references to "opinions of wise, sagacious people" or he would quote a general opinion (Plezia 1989: 81). Very few references to original works are stylistically faithful to the original. Gallus usually treated borrowed excerpts from ancient literature quite freely. (Maleczyński 1952: LV, LX–LXI). Rhythm was more important for Gallus than grammatical or stylistic accuracy. He similarly treated quotes or references to the works of mediaeval authors. The Polish chronicler did not look for sophisticated analogies, expanded comparisons and fancy examples. He chose the ones which were known and comprehensible to the reader. Cosmas goes further, elaborately creating his story crafted from his own content and ancient reminiscences. He quotes Latin poetry, skillfully linking strange lines with his own writing. This situation occurs in Cosmas's chronicle for example in chapter 9 book I. The chronicler placed there two two-line rhyming couplets. The first lines are almost faithful borrowings from Ovid (*Met.* III, 415) and Horace (*Epod.* XV, 1), and the latter are written by the Bohemian chronicler (*Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum* 1923: 20). He puts multiple Biblical and classical quotations and paraphrases in his text in a very liberal method, but remains faithful to the ancient context of the mentioned work. Sometimes such action emphasises the meaning and significance of the text, sometimes they are only a stylistic features adorning the piece (Wolverton 2015: 68–69). He does it adeptly and aptly, proving his own knowledge and understanding of quoted works.

Both chroniclers naturally refer to the works of their predecessors, skillfully using the imaginarium of the ancient world. On the whole, mediaeval literature, both poetry and prose, had the same origins and similar means of expression. Literature written in the Middle Ages in the western cultural zone was in majority European and not national in its

character. It could deal with regional themes but in a universal way, comprehensible in whole Latin Europe. Both analysed chronicles – *Chronica Boemorum* and *Cronica et gesta ducum sive principum Polonorum* are part of this Latin universum.

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Elementy antycznego świata w kronikach Kosmasa z Pragi i Anonima zwanego Gallem

Streszczenie

Artykuł pokazuje sposób, w jaki dwaj średniowieczni kronikarze: Anonim zwany Gallem oraz Kosmas z Pragi włączają do swoich narracji elementy antycznego świata. Zarówno *Chronica Boemorum* Kosmasa jak Gallowa *Cronica et gesta ducum sive principum Polonorum* swobodnie nawiązują do Pisma Świętego oraz pogańskiej literatury starożytnej. Autorka wskazuje na podobieństwa i różnice takiego sposobu wykorzystania dorobku poprzedników. Do pierwszych należy naturalny i swobodny styl, w jakim obaj kronikarze posługują się imaginariem antycznego świata, traktując go jako zbiór gotowych przykładów. Podstawową zaś różnicę stanowi fakt, że Kosmas, zdecydowanie częściej i wielowątkowo odwołuje się do dorobku antyku. Autorka zaznacza także, że kanonik praski w swym podejściu do wątków i motywów antycznych był bliższy kolejnemu kronikarzowi polskich dziejów Mistrzowi Wincentemu zwanemu Kadłubkiem.

Słowa kluczowe: Kosmas z Pragi, Anonim zwany Gallem, historiografia, kronikarstwo średniowieczne, motywy antyczne