

# BYZANTINE TRADITION IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: THE CASE OF POLAND<sup>1</sup>

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During the period in which Poland lost its independence (1795–1918), the country was shared among three powers: Russia, Austro-Hungary and Prussia (subsequently Germany). The Congress of Vienna (1815) and the failed November Uprising (1831) confirmed within Poles the conviction that the obtainment of freedom by means of the aid of a single or block of countries was impossible. The ally on the road to liberation was to be Europe, understood as a community federal in character. When in 1856 Victor Hugo unfolded before the participants of the peace congress in Paris a vision of a United States of Europe (Messières 1952), Joachim Lelewel—the most eminent Polish historian of Romanticism—wrote about an alliance of the nations of Central-Eastern Europe (Wierzbicki 2009, 79).

In his philosophical reflections on history, one of the most important roles was to be played out by the East-West dichotomy and the Eastern nature of Russia and Byzantium. Poles were to constitute the Slavic key to a free and united continent and were to capture for European civilization the “barbarian” countries of the East. The political composition of the former noble Commonwealth was perceived by Lelewel as opposition to the feudal structures operating in the West and to be the anticipation of modern democracy (Wierzbicki 1984, 133; Baár 2010, 176–77). The abrogation of Occidental criteria in the evaluation of the history of Poland, according to which Poland was delayed in its civilizational development, constituting a peripheral country, allowed for the advancement of a thesis as to the originality of the historical process. Poland’s relations with Europe may consequently be defined as neurotic in nature (Janion 2007, 185). As there is no way within the scope of such a short article to

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undertake a comprehensive analysis of this complex problem of the presence of the Byzantine tradition in nineteenth-century Poland, I will concentrate my attention on art, which—as I consider—fairly well illustrates that in Central-Eastern Europe various models in the reception of Byzantium came together and met.

The Polish historiography of the first half of the nineteenth century repeats to a large extent negative stereotypes about Byzantium, rooted in the times of the Enlightenment—chiefly the work of Charles Montesquieu, Voltaire, Charles Lebeau and Jean François Marmontel (Marciniak 2009, 65–69), and popularized by Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), which enjoyed a wide readership for almost two centuries. This aversion in relation to Byzantium was generated by the Enlightenment disgust with the medieval Church, in particular with the organized hierarchical religiosity, and also by a reinterpretation of Greek philosophy and the idea of progress, the negation of which was to have been the Eastern Roman Empire (McKitterick and Quinault 1997; Haarer 2010, 11–13).

Of huge importance with regard to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought on Byzantium were, in addition, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1837), within whose system general history constitutes the stage in the process of the realization of the absolute, the spirit of the world. The scheme for their development is divided into four parts: the Eastern world, the Greek, the Roman and the Germanic world. Given that Rome did not create for the Christian religion the bases for the construction of a state, it was to be the Germanic peoples who were called on to personify “the direct spiritual present.” According to Hegel, Byzantium had not been able to undertake this task for it had grown into a former culture and had undergone degeneration, while its history had been a thousand-year streak of repulsive crimes and inertia (Maj 2007, 164).

The historiography of Byzantium for a long time is still going to bear the “luminal” character bestowed on it by him (Turner 1969, 94–130) as a transitory stage, a thousand-year period “between” antiquity and the Renaissance, and almost exclusively a transmitter, and not the generator of traditions.

The Polish edition of Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s *A History of Ancient Art* appeared only in 1815, although it was expanded by Stanisław Kostka Potocki to include the works of Byzantine art up to the fall of Constantinople. Potocki—a traveler and admirer of the art of antiquity (he commissioned, among other things, a graphic reconstruction of the Villa Laurentina on the basis of Pliny the Younger’s description)—recognized

the antiquity tendencies prevalent within the Byzantine painting of the second half of the ninth century and in the tenth century, which one hundred years later were termed the “Macedonian Renaissance” in the subject literature (Smoraġ-Różycka 2002, 61). His work was, however, soon forgotten with only a very few making recourse to it.

In an attempt to commemorate the “two first Christian rulers of Poland,” the most important work of neo-Byzantine architecture in the Polish lands within the area of the Prussian partition was founded—the Gold Chapel at the cathedral in Poznań (1836–37). This design by the Italian architect Francesco L. Lanci was prepared according to the instructions of Edward Raczyński, who was acquainted with the buildings of Constantinople, Kiev and Italy. One may mention as the prototype the temples of Ravenna and Sicily. In order to understand this aesthetic choice it is essential to briefly sketch the context for the reception of Byzantine art during the first half of the nineteenth century. One of the sources of direct inspiration was undoubtedly the Court Church of All Saints (Allerheiligen-Hofkirche) in Munich (1826–37) funded by Ludwig I of Bavaria on the basis of a design by Leo von Klenze (Ostrowska-Kęłowska 1997, 92).

Already in 1806 Friedrich Schlegel had written that the oldest Rhenish churches were characterized by “Hellenic” elements, which had come to Germany by way of Byzantium. In 1810 Sulpiz Boisserée defined this self-same architecture as *neugriechisch* and used this adjective interchangeably with the word “Byzantine.” At the same time, Schlegel was working on *The Philosophy of History* (published in 1828), in which he claimed that the style of Byzantine churches was the main and primary model for Gothic architecture, while Byzantine “extraordinariness” and “spirituality” had inspired the German Middle Ages. Equally, one can in no way pass over Goethe’s essay *Heidelberg* (1816), in which the poet refers to medieval Greek art with much admiration, while its influence he finds in old German painting (Bullen 2003, 17).

In turn Boisserée, living between Munich and Paris, became with time a propagator of the thesis of the Byzantine origin of medieval Rhenish architecture. Boisserée’s ideas were “naturalized” in France by Ludovic Vitet—a known novelist and journalist of the time. Following a trip to Germany in 1829, during which he visited Sinzig and Maria Laach, he adopted Boisserée’s terminology (he translated *neugriechisch* as *néo-grec* or *Byzantin*; Brownlee 1991) and he popularized it in his editorial and conservational works (from 1830 he was the general director of the office for monuments of the past). Prosper Mérimée, who was to inherit the position after Boisserée, claimed that French Gothic owed much to its

Byzantine models, while he found “Byzantine” elements in Paris churches. Wincenty Pol was later to be in Poland a propagator of the viewpoint that Gothic was the “heir” to Byzantine art (Bęczkowska 2010).

Of importance in the development of Raczyński’s interest in Byzantine art was the circle of Frederick Wilhelm IV of Prussia and his brother—Prince Charles of Prussia. Besides construction works, research projects were also initiated. It was the King of Prussia who sent Wilhelm Salzenberger (a pupil of Karl Friedrich Schinkel) to Constantinople in order to document Byzantine works of art. The effect of this expedition—the richly illustrated volume *The Ancient Christian Monuments of Constantinople from the 5th to the 12th Century* (Salzenberg 1854)—became for the Cracow aesthetic Józef Kremer the impulse to prepare the first Polish work on Byzantine art (Kremer 1856), in which he, as one of the first, demanded protection for wooden ecclesiastical architecture.

In contrast to the suggestions of certain researchers, the theory about the Slavic rite (eleventh to thirteenth century) in the south of Poland was not to have any influence on the decision to adopt a neo-Byzantine style for the Gold Chapel in Poznan; for, as Raczyński emphasized, Poland adopted Christianity from the West, something which was accentuated through the subject matter of the pictures adorning the chapel. The today falsified view on the initial adoption of Christianity by Poland in a Slavic rite and then only subsequently within the Latin rite (966) was hotly discussed within Polish Romantic literature—and was propagated from the end of the 1830s by Waclaw Aleksander Maciejowski, who argued the matter with Joachim Lelewel. The popularity of this idea may be explained in the following way: hostility in relation to Germany, which derived at the time from the political situation, was to project itself onto the interpretation of the past. The adoption of Christianity through a German intermediacy was perceived as the beginning of the Latinization of Slavonia as well as a dependence upon its powerful neighbor (Janion 2006, 102). An alternative history, in which the founding myth for the Polish state was the adoption of baptism into the Christian faith from the hands of the Greek brothers Cyril and Methodius, gave a sense of a separate cultural identity and linked national identity with the distant and grand culture of Byzantium.

Despite the presence of Slavophile tendencies within the historical literature of the time, the Polish syntheses of art history of the second half of the nineteenth century repeat the scheme presented in German textbooks on art history, ones that marginalize the art of the Eastern Roman Empire. From the analysis conducted by Robert S. Nelson of the syntheses of art history published during the course of the last 150 years, it

results that in the majority Byzantine art was separated from that of the medieval art of the West and was juxtaposed with Islamic art (Nelson 1996). Such an approach was adopted by Franz Kugler in his *A Textbook on Art History* (1842), who following on from the chapter on ancient Christian art places subsequently, among others, ones on Persian art, Indian art as well as “Oriental-Christian” art (including that of Rus’). Despite the Hegelian periodization, Kugler’s conception is less teleological: in the textbook there is more on descriptions of works of art and the characteristics adopted in the creativity of individual artists than there is attention paid to considerations of ideas, although the author does not miss out on the relations between art and society in various epochs.

Kugler’s concept is repeated by Carl Schnaase in the popular *A History of the Fine Arts* (1843–79). Schnaase presents the works of Byzantine art as “historical progress,” while the breaking with ancient realism he explains by means of the abstract spirit of the new art.

One may also notice the phenomenon of the Orientalization of Byzantium in the Polish historical literature (Maj 2011, 414), in which the component elements that are common in the model of thinking about Byzantium to this day repeat: despotism, lack of invention, splendor, ceremoniousness, corruption etc. Writers contrast most often the “Asiatic” luxury and decadence of the Byzantine Empire with the “healthy” Greco-Roman tradition as well as underlining the empire’s pernicious contacts with Eastern civilizations. Such a “positional superiority” is visible in numerous accounts from expeditions, including those of the already mentioned Edward Raczyński but also the tales of Józef Drohojowski, Henryk Aulich, Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, Ignacy Hołowiński, Józef Sękowski, Ignacy Pietraszewski and Maurycy Mann.

In turn, within the Austrian area of partition the creation of a national structure for the protection of architectural monuments was also to result in the development of research into Orthodox church art—from 1889 there operated conservation bodies for Eastern and Western Galicia. In 1881, on the initiative of Wojciech Dzieduszycki, the National Archaeological Society was created in Lvov, which from 1882 published *The Archaeological Review*, while in 1885 it organized the first archaeological congress (Małkiewicz 2003, 22). The accompanying “First Polish-Ruthenian Archaeological Exhibition” brought about academic discussion on the subject of the existence of an independent school for icon painting within the southeastern lands of the Commonwealth. At the time, there appeared demands for comparative studies into the post-Byzantine art of Central-Eastern Europe (Kłosińska 1973, 17–23).

The relation to Byzantine art within the partitioned area under Russian control was somewhat different, as academic research was utilized also for political ends. Towards the end of the nineteenth century in Lublin, Sandomierz and Wiślica were discovered sets of Byzantine-Ruthenian wall paintings from the fifteenth century, painted during the Baroque period. These works, which are an interesting example of the adaptation of the Byzantine iconographic program to the interiors of Gothic Catholic temples, became the subject of debates between Polish and Russian academics (first and foremost representatives of the Tsarist Archaeological Commission sent from Saint Petersburg). Both sides accused each other of manipulating the past for nationalistic motives (Bilewicz 1998).

Concurrently within Polish writings on art, pre-Gothic art was identified with the Byzantine tradition to almost the mid-nineteenth century (the exception here being the already mentioned Raczyński); consequently there is no surprise in the incoherent comments on Byzantine art contained within the treatise of the Jesuit Sebastian Sierakowski (1812) or in the article of Dyzma Bończa-Tomaszewski on Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (1822). Knowledge of Byzantine architecture was limited in Polish art history to two churches: Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and Saint Mark's in Venice (Jaroszewski 1994, 74–88).

In the first phase of historicism all the historical styles had still to be precisely differentiated. At the beginning of the twentieth century the general term *Rundbogenstil* was used to define buildings with elements of Byzantine, Italian or early Renaissance art. The concept of a “Romanesque style” was introduced around 1830 by Arcisse de Caumont and was made popular in the 1840s. This concerned Western art from between the eleventh and the thirteenth century. Terminological chaos lasted within Polish literature right up until the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Romanesque buildings were labeled as “Byzantine” by among others: Franciszek Maksymilian Sobieszczański, Aleksander Przeździecki, Edward Rastawiecki. The only exception was Józef Kremer, who was the first to apply the correct terminology.

The majority of art historians of the day measured the art of the Eastern Roman Empire through the criteria of Western realism. A positive approach and relation to Byzantine art was rather an exception (it being enough to mention Wincenty Pol, who considered, for example, that icons initiated the native tradition of painting), while even the most important Romantic writers (Adam Mickiewicz, Zygmunt Krasiński and Cyprian Kamil Norwid) referred with unconcealed aversion to the Eastern cultural tradition, associating it with that of Imperial Russia (Kuziak 2004; Kryszowski 2009). Byzantine painting was for Józef Muczkowski “mass

incompetence”; it was evaluated by Władysław Łuszczkiewicz as being “far from the demands of genuine art,” while Feliks Kopera could see no “artistic virtues” in it whatsoever (Różycka-Bryzek 1965, 291–92; Różycka-Bryzek 1996, 16–18). In turn Leonard Lepszy justified an interest in the works of Byzantine art through their “undoubtedly significant” influence on Polish culture. The negative image associated with this art only started to change at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of systematic archaeological and historical research. The more balanced approach and opinions of Marian Sokołowski with regard to Byzantine painting resulted to a large degree from his knowledge of the latest foreign-language literature on the subject (Sokołowski 1899, 468–69; Kunińska 2013, 8).

The Byzantine tradition was still for decades to be widely associated with Russification (Dąbrowska 2003). In 1918, following the restoration of Poland’s sovereignty and independence, many Orthodox churches were demolished, including the monumental Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Warsaw—the symbol of Russian rule built on the Saxon Square in Warsaw in the years 1894–1912 (Paszkievicz 1991, 114–37; Paszkievicz 1999, 7).

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