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REVIEW

JEANNIE ŁABNO,  
“COMMEMORATING  
THE POLISH RENAISSANCE CHILD”,

ASHGATE, FARNHAM 2011, 472 PP., ILS.

Foreign language books dedicated to early Polish art are extremely rare, therefore, any such publication entails hope that it will draw the attention of many foreign readers to this area. Admittedly, the book at issue also might play such a role, yet sadly it will not contribute to popularising reliable knowledge about Polish history and art. This results from the fact that Jeannie Łabno's work is flawed with extremely serious methodological errors, while the information it contains is to a large degree distorted and untrue.

The book was written on the basis of a doctoral dissertation prepared under the tuition of Professor Nigel Llewellyn and defended at the University of Sussex. The subject it discusses – Renaissance children's tombstones – was first appreciated a relatively long time ago<sup>1</sup>, whereas the most relevant examples were collected and classified by Maria Kołakowska already in 1956. The above-mentioned researcher also indicated the most characteristic iconographic patterns for a group of such monuments where the motif of *putto* with a skull, a popular allegory for the vanity of human existence, was used as the image of the deceased<sup>2</sup>. Łabno zealously endeavoured to develop Kołakowska's research, resorting to methods from the range of statistics and cultural anthropology, yet her lack of skill in handling historical methods and ignorance of many fundamental facts prevented her from reaching any new conclusions.



1. A map of Poland in the 16<sup>th</sup> century according to J. Łabno, *Commemorating the Polish Renaissance Child*, front matter

The need to determine the boundaries of Poland already presented the author with a fundamental problem; according to the map printed on the pre-title page [Fig. 1], not only did they encompass the Great Duchy of Lithuania in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but they also included Bohemia with Silesia and Hungary with Croatia<sup>3</sup>. The location and political status of Lithuania are such a mystery for the author that it is

<sup>1</sup> L. LEPSZY, [Nagrobek Katarzyny Pileckiej], "Sprawozdania Komisji do Badania Historii Sztuki w Polsce", 7, 1905, No. 4, columns CCCXV–CCCXVII; M. SOKOŁOWSKI, [Uzupełnienie w sprawie nagrobka w Pilicy], *ibidem*, columns CCCXVII–CCCXXII.

<sup>2</sup> M. KOŁAKOWSKA, *Renesansowe nagrobki dziecięce w Polsce XVI i pierwszej połowy XVII wieku*, "Studia Renesansowe", 1, 1956, pp. 231–255.

<sup>3</sup> The map was copied (without source reference) from N. DAVIES's work, *God's Playground*, where it was provided with the caption "The Jagiellonian Realm (c. 1500)" (New York 2005, p. 112).



2. Images of Hieronim, Zofia, and Małgorzata Modliszewski on the family tombstone, church of St. Michael (presently a Cathedral) in Łomża (photo: K. Blaschke)

difficult to say whether her sphere of interest extended to monuments located in the Lithuanian territory. Admittedly, the opening chapter provides a description of the social and political situation of Lithuania, while the catalogue contains two monuments from Lithuania (tombstones of members of the Radziwiłł family in Nesvizh [Polish: Nieśwież]), yet on several occasions the author declares that she employed only Polish examples (p. 13, 153, 154). Perhaps it is so due to the fact that in her opinion the areas of the present day Belarus were part of Poland, not Lithuania (pp. 153, 154, footnotes 5, 251), or since she uses the word 'Poland' instead of the term Commonwealth<sup>4</sup>. The book also contains an array of untrue information regarding the society of Poland and its neighbours. Reading it, one may find out that before Poland formally converted to Christianity, Judaism had been the local religion<sup>5</sup>, whereas Ducal Prussia was established already in 1466 (p. 419). The author also muses why tombstone inscriptions in Silesia are in German if inhabitants of the province speak Silesian, only to be concluded that the tombstone inscription had the status of an official document, while German gained the status of the official language in Silesia after the province had been annexed by the Habsburgs (p. 163).

Yet it is the information presented by the author in relation to the topic of the allegedly unusual status of women in the Polish society, in which the author sees the reasons for the "exceptional" popularity of children's tombstones in our

country, that is particularly bizarre. Łabno (p. 142) quotes an opinion of Bianka Pietrow-Ennker, according to whom the Polish woman, "Matka Polka" (the term translated by the author as "the holy mother of Poland") was considered to be the earthly successor of the Blessed Virgin Mary<sup>6</sup>, which in turn is related to the fact that the cult of Mary in Poland is significantly more popular than in any other country, including Italy (p. 53). The spurious nature of this thesis would be best verified by comparing the situation in Poland with that in other countries, however, the author did not take the efforts to do so. Limiting such a comparison to but a single example, it would be possible to find that whereas in Bohemia and Moravia as many as 52 Loreto Chapels were erected<sup>7</sup>, in Poland only 22 such objects were constructed<sup>8</sup>. Perhaps this argument would not suffice to convince the author who, as already mentioned, holds that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century these lands were part of Poland, yet the literature on the subject easily supplies more in-depth analyses of the sources of the cult of Mary in Europe<sup>9</sup>. Numerous other distortions which found its way to the pages of the work subject to the present analysis also must be rectified. E.g. the coronation of the painting of the Holy Mary of Częstochowa in 1717 was not equivalent with the recognition of the Black Madonna as the Queen of Poland (p. 142), the principle of nobility's equality by no means signified that in the Old Polish society women enjoyed the same rights as men (p. 45, 46, 140), while *ius communicativum* did not vest the wife with the right to inherit her husband's office (p. 49). Neither is it true that families using the same coat of arms belonged to a single clan and added the name of their coat of arms to their surname to emphasise this community (p. 45).

The amount of untrue information included in the book obviously reflects the quality of sources on which the author based her knowledge. E.g. the exceptional nature of the Polish cult of Mary was brought to her attention by Włodek Kowalski of the University of Warsaw<sup>10</sup>. She particularly fre-

<sup>4</sup> Such a possibility is indicated by the sentence on p. 3: "Poland' otherwise refers to a cultural realm that includes the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the adjacent territories, which were both influenced by, and mediated, cultural patterns".

<sup>5</sup> "...Judaism, introduced in the ninth century, had a longer history than Christianity, to which Poland was formally converted in AD 966..." (p. 31).

<sup>6</sup> "This readiness to accord recognition and respect to women is held to be expressed most clearly in the image of matka Polka, the holy mother of Poland: just as Mary – symbolized in the iconography of Częstochowa – had been appointed to watch over the Polish nation, so too women – as Mary's successors on earth – were seen as being entrusted with the task of caring for the smallest unit of the nation, the family, and seeing to it that it had Christian values instilled into it" (B. PIETROW-ENNKER, *Women in Polish society: a historical introduction*, [in:] *Women in Polish society*, ed. R. Jaworski, B. Pietrow-Ennker, Boulder, New York 1992, p. 1).

<sup>7</sup> J. BUKOVSKÝ, *Loretánské kaple v Čechách a na Moravě*, Praha 2000.

<sup>8</sup> S. MICHALCZUK, *Domek loretański w Gołębju. Geneza jego treści ideowych i artystycznych*, [in:] *Treść dzieła sztuki*, Warszawa 1969, p. 153, footnote 2.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. especially J. ROYT, *Obraz a kult v Čechách 17. a 18. století*, Praha 2011 pp. 222–248 (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1999); A. CORETH, *Pietas Austriaca. Österreichische Frömmigkeit im Barock*, München 1982, p. 45–72.

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps he is identical with Włodzimierz Kowalski, M.A., who in 2007 worked as a Polish language lecturer at the holiday Polish



3. The tombstone of Luigi, Ippolita, and Margherita Trivulzio, Trivulzio Chapel at the church of St. Nazzarus in Milan (photo: M. Kurzej)

quently resorted to not fully competent English sources of a popular nature – especially those by Norman Davies and Maria Bogucka. The author was most probably reduced to using such literature since her command of Polish is insufficient, as indicated by numerous errors and mistakes in the spelling of proper and place names<sup>11</sup>. Neither does she know Latin, which prevented her from correctly copying and interpreting inscriptions from the tombstones she discusses<sup>12</sup>. It is clearly manifest in the example of Katarzyna Pilecka's monument, crucial for the main thesis of the dissertation, which, according to Łabno, bears an inscription stating that it was funded to the mother's request by the child's father (pp. 144, 170, 180)<sup>13</sup>. The author was even unable to develop abbreviations, for example claiming that two of the three children in the Modliszewski family bore the names of Hier and Malgta (p. 312) [Fig. 2]. Also the only single verse inscription in Greek that she mentions was copied incorrectly (pp. 198, 334). It must also be said

language course for foreigners, see: [www.polonicum.uw.edu.pl/pdf/Kurs\\_Letni\\_52.pdf](http://www.polonicum.uw.edu.pl/pdf/Kurs_Letni_52.pdf) (July 6, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Barbara Tęczyna (instead of Barbara Tęczyńska) p. 182, Jan Gamratie (instead of Jan Gamrat) p. 298, Restarzew pow. Środokowy (instead of Restarzew Środokowy, pow. Łask) p. 323, Żydaczów (instead of Żydaczów) p. 328, Andrzej (instead of Andrzej) p. 212, 357, Eremusa (instead of Eremus) p. 206, 390, Proszów (instead of Proszowice) p. 390, św. Wit was rendered into English as St. Vitech (instead of St. Vitus) p. 405; racy (instead of rajca) p. 408, Korpzsy (instead of Korpysz) p. 437.

<sup>12</sup> Page 280 holds acknowledgements addressed to Gil Partington for translation of Latin inscriptions.

<sup>13</sup> In reality, the inscription on the tombstone informs that it was funded by both parents following the fashion of Hungarian princes (*more stirpis Ducum Ungarorum*). The error in Łabno's book probably results from indiscriminate adoption of Sokołowski's interpretation, who in this way wanted to defend the thesis declaring independence of Polish works from foreign models (see: M. SOKOŁOWSKI, *Uzupełnienie*, column CCCXXI).



4. The tombstone of Joachim de Valois, church of St. Martin in Halle (photo: M. Kurzej)

that the author affords an equally unkind treatment to the English language, adopting absurd rules of spelling and declension of Polish proper names in English sentences – a fact which certainly will not render the reading of her work easier for readers using any of these languages<sup>14</sup>. Also the use of Polish terms, such as “szlachta” or “herb” in the place of their English equivalents (“nobility”, “coat of arms”) is an error. The style of the work raises reservations as well. It is of a personal nature, almost that of memoirs<sup>15</sup>, and in places it hugely departs from the principles of scientific objectivism. The very structure of the book is also incorrect. It is divided into very small fragments. 251 pages of the main body of text have been divided (introduction and conclusion excluded) into five parts and thirteen chapters, which are divided into still smaller subchapters. Each of the parts is provided with a separate introduction and conclusion, while some of the chapters are also supplied with additional summaries. As a result, the work contains multiple repetitions which at times entail transformations of hypotheses into established facts<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, eight initial chapters (pp. 1–152) do not pertain to the main subject of the book, being limited only to presenting a simplified description of the political, social and religious situation in Poland; a description that is marked by a substantial number of distortions and factual errors. E.g. all of Chapter 4

<sup>14</sup> The author's use of Polish place names and church dedications in an English text is entirely incomprehensible; what is more, the author attempts to decline them in keeping with Polish, not English grammar construction (p. 280). In effect she writes in the following manner: “Jan was buried in Wilnie (Vilnius) in the church of Św. Michała” instead of “Jan was buried in Vilnius (pol. Wilno) in the church of St. Michael” (p. 215).

<sup>15</sup> E.g. on p. 123, the author describes the feeling of discomfort she felt when looking on Anna Sułkowska's tombstone in Pabianice.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. in the catalogue (p. 356) Wilhelm van den Blocke is only a possible author of the Kos' tombstone, yet in the main text (p. 211) his authorship is accepted without reservations.



5. Epitaphs of the von Hanau-Lichtenberg family, church of St. Nicolas in Babenhausen (photo: L. Aufsberg)

(*Borders, Boundaries and Barriers*, pp. 61–72) constitutes an unnecessary digression regarding the definition of border, provincial, and peripheral regions, which in a significant part was literally copied from older works.

Editorial shortcomings, however, are not as grave as discrediting methodological errors. The author endeavours to demonstrate that commemorating deceased children, girls in particular, with tombstones was a phenomenon characteristic of Poland (p. 136) remaining in contradiction with funeral customs in other countries of Europe (p. 152). She seeks the roots of this custom in the specificity of the Polish society, claiming that the approach of Polish nobility to their children was radically different from that in other European countries (p. 51), whereas family relations in our country were different than anywhere else in the world (p. 148). Hence, she dedicated substantial swathes of her work to Sarmatism, portraying it as an exceptional ideology of Polish nobility (p. 43–44), which gave rise to a conviction that noble origins are the source of courage and patriotism, thus providing the grounds for the formation of a specific model of family (pp. 57, 408)<sup>17</sup>. Meanwhile, Sarmatism was merely one of typical European ethnogenic myths with its equivalents in almost each European country<sup>18</sup>. Also, the

conviction of the superiority of noble origins as a source of virtues was by no means limited to Poland; it was common all over Europe and probably in every society with the caste structure. Inaccurate arguments the author brings forth in support of this thesis include a comparison of the Polish and English society – according to the author the latter did not commemorate deceased children with tombstones (pp. 139–140), whereas one of the reasons for this state of affairs was the elimination of the cult of the Blessed Mary by the Reformation (p. 141). Meanwhile, commemorating children with tombstones was particularly popular in England, of which the author may have well found out, if only from the books she includes in her bibliography<sup>19</sup>. Admittedly, English tombstones more frequently commemorated entire families, not exclusively children (although there were also

<sup>17</sup> The description of Polish society presented in the book is internally contradictory. E.g. on p. 408 one may read that Sarmatism was related to intolerance, whereas on pp. 35–37 it is precisely tolerance that is portrayed as one of the characteristics of Polish society.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. e.g. K. JOHANNESSON, *The Renaissance of the Goths in Sixteenth-Century Sweden*, Berkely, Los Angeles, Oxford 1991;

P. PIGGOTT, *Ancient Brittons and the Antiquarian Imagination*, London 1989; G. BROGI BERCOFF, *La storiografia umanistica di Dalmazia e Croazia tra modelli italiani e miti nazionali*, “Ricerche slavistiche”, 36, 1989, p. 97–114 (reprinted [in:] eadem, *Królestwo Słowian. Historiografia Renesansu i Baroku w krajach słowiańskich*, Izabelin 1998, p. 29–42); R. E. ASHER, *National Myth in Renaissance France*, Edinburgh 1993; R. BIZZOCCHI, *Genealogie incredibili. Scritti di storia nell'Europa moderna*, Bologna 1995. K. FRIEDRICH, *The Other Prussia. Royal Prussia, Poland and Liberty, 1569–1772*, Cambridge 2000, p. 75–76 (Polish edition: *Inne Prusy. Prusy Królewskie i Polska między wolnością a wolnościami (1569–1572)*, Poznań 2005, pp. 114–116).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. e.g. N. LLEWELLYN, *Funeral Monuments in Post-Reformation England*, Cambridge 2000.

tombstones like that – e.g. the 1607 tombstone of Sophie Stuart in the Westminster Abbey), yet the author failed to explain why a separate tombstone for a child would be proof of different social conditions compared to including a child in a family mausoleum. She limited herself to stating that the situation in Poland was completely different<sup>20</sup>.

Earlier children's tombstones whose existence challenges Łabno's thesis may be found in many other countries where they had been erected already in the Middle Ages. The most exquisite Italian examples include the tombstone of Guarniero degli Antelminelli († 1327), the son of prominent military leader Castruccio Castracani, in the church of St. Francis in Sarzana, produced by Giovanni di Balduccio<sup>21</sup> and a monument to three children of Giovanni Nicolò Trivulzio († 1512) in the family chapel at the church of St. Nazarus in Milan<sup>22</sup> [Fig. 3]. Among the North European examples, attention is due to the tombstone of Joachim († 1460), the son of the King of France Louis XI in Halle in the Netherlands [Fig. 4], which is all the more interesting that its creation (unlike in the case of Polish monuments) may really be connected to the cult of Mary<sup>23</sup>. Children's tombstones are very abundant in German lands<sup>24</sup>, while the tradition of erecting them is also old, as attested by epitaphs of Johann and Dieter von Hanau-Lichtenberg (both † 1473) in Babenhausen [Fig. 5]. Plates with the image of a kneeling child also occurred in the 16<sup>th</sup> century<sup>25</sup>, in time losing popularity and yielding to the image of a standing figure<sup>26</sup>. Several monumetal



7. The epitaph of Anna Elberts, cemetery church of St. Laurent in Freudenberg (photo: L. Aufsberg)

<sup>20</sup> "In Poland, the situation was very different. Here the child monuments valued the children in their own right, as individuals, and included inscriptions, verses and family symbols" (p. 208).

<sup>21</sup> J. WYNDHAM POPE-HENNESSY, *Italian gothic sculpture*, London 1996, p. 254.

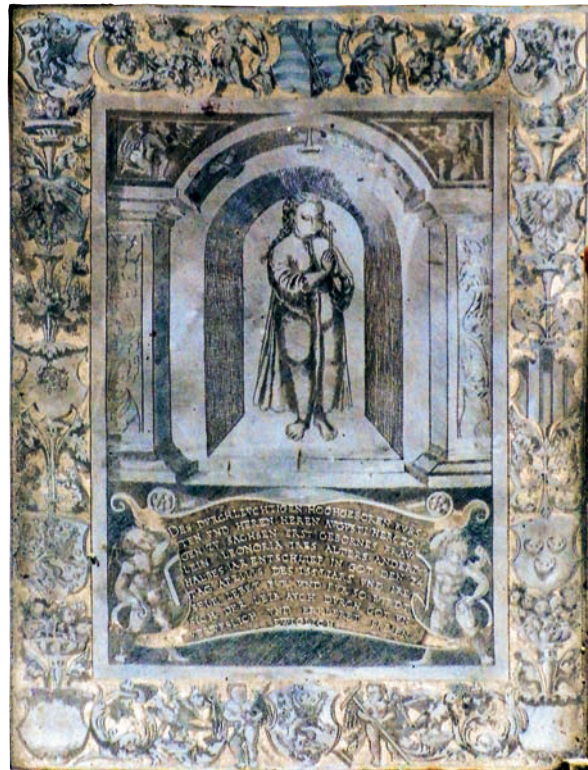
<sup>22</sup> D. APOLLONIO, *Il mausoleo Trivulzio. Bramantino e Leonardo*, Poggio a Caiano 2009.

<sup>23</sup> The Sanctuary of Our Lady the Black Virgin in Halle was famous as a place where children were healed and brought back to life. Cf. H. SCHNITKER, *Margaret of York on Pilgrimage: The Exercise of Devotion and the Religious Traditions of the House of York*, [in:] *Reputation and Representation in Fifteenth-Century Europe*, ed. D. L. Biggs, p. D. Michalove, A. Compton Reeves, Leiden 2004, p. 92.

<sup>24</sup> It can be easily verified submitting a query to the generally accessible photo-collection of University of Marburg ([www.bildindex.de](http://www.bildindex.de)).

<sup>25</sup> E.g. epitaph of a girl of the von Mandelsloh family, probably † 1583, in Bad Münders am Deister; epitaph of Judith von Salza, † 1610, in Ebersbach near Görlitz.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. epitaphs of Christoph and Otto von Ebeleben, both † 1568, in Sangerhausen; a double epitaph of the Pfeifer brothers, † 1591 and 1592 in Leising near Döbeln; an epitaph of Anna Ritter, † 1595 in Marienkirche in Berlin; an epitaph of Helena von Alvensleben, † 1621, in Beeskow; an epitaph of Brigida Wolffskeelip, † 1631, presently in Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich; a double epitaph of the Silberschmidt sisters, both † 1632, in Weiden in der Oberpfalz; a double epitaph of the von Bassenheim sisters in Niederzissen; an epitaph of Bernard Wittenhofer, † 1679, in Celle.



6. The epitaph of Eleonore of Saxony, church of Our Lady in Freiberg (photo: M. Kurzej 2014)



8. The tombstone of the Deane family, church of St. Olave in London (photo: K. Blaschke)



9. The tombstone of daughters of Hans von Aachen, Cathedral in Prague (photo: M. Kurzej)

brasses of that type are housed in the mausoleum of Saxon Dukes in Freiberg. Among those representing girls is the one dedicated to Eleonore (1551–1553) [Fig. 6], daughter of August and Anne of Denmark. A representation of a child reclining on a skull was also used, as attested by the epitaph of Anna Elberts, † 1612, in Freudenberg am Main [Fig. 7] with iconography very similar to Polish examples. Representations of deceased children lying on a skull were also known in England, as exemplified by the family tombstone of James Deane's family in the church of St. Olave in London<sup>27</sup> [Fig. 8]. In turn, the epitaph of daughters of Hans von Aachen in the Prague Cathedral from 1603<sup>28</sup> [Fig. 9] is an important example of an image of a child recumbent on the sarcophagus. However, to refute the thesis of exceptionality of Polish tombstones of children, the very examples collected by the author will suffice. In Chapter 9 (*The Monumental Body and the Renaissance Child: Trends and Patterns*), she presents statistics from which it follows that children's tombstones were decidedly less popular in Poland than abroad (pp. 157, 172).

The gravest methodological error is the very choice of the material presented in the book. Searching for the grounds of the discussed artistic phenomena in the specificity of the Polish society, the author ignores the fact that this society functioned mostly within Poland's internal political boundaries and she does so probably because she is not familiar with these boundaries and is unable to make use of maps or fundamental historical studies<sup>29</sup>. The author may be aware of this problem, as she devotes a lot of space to the issue of boundaries (pp. 61–69, 249), ineptly trying to demonstrate that the historical boundaries of Poland are too difficult to establish and were subject to too numerous changes to be useful in discussing artistic phenomena (pp. 3, 9, 18, 205). Hence, she arrives at a conclusion that instead of political boundaries, one should apply the notion of cultural boundaries<sup>30</sup>, the course of which is delineated precisely

Images of standing and kneeling figures were sometimes combined within one composition, as attested by the epitaph of Julius and Kunigunde von Ehrenberg, both † 1575, in Heinsheim, depicting a standing girl and a kneeling boy.

<sup>27</sup> Another example comes as the image of Dorothy Tyreil on the tombstone of her mother who died in 1631, in Chilton (Buckinghamshire).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. J. KUTHAN, J. ROYT, *Katedrála sv. Víta, Václava a Vojtěcha. Svätyně českých patronů a Králů*, Praha 2011, p. 441.

<sup>29</sup> Proof of this comes as the sentence on p. 9: "Trying to identify precisely where to draw the line between Silesia and the Kingdom of Poland proved futile and it is, therefore, only approximate". In reality, this border was one of the most stable in Europe. Its principal course had been established already in 1343, and after it was rendered more precise in the years 1528–1531 (which did not entail a change in the ownership status of any major localities), it did not change until the final years of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (cf. G. LABUDA, *Polska granica zachodnia*, Poznań 1971, p. 81, 94).

<sup>30</sup> "...the question of precisely where a line might be drawn on a map is not relevant to a discussion of cultural diffusion. (...) I would

by the form of the works of art (pp. 153, 154). In this way Łabno attempts to prove that children's tombstones are Polish not due to the fact of their particular popularity in Poland, but due to the fact that their popularity is connected with a specific model of Polish culture which impacted also the neighbouring territories. Thus, a self-confirming theory has emerged, proposing that it is possible to include completely random phenomena characteristic of randomly selected areas within Polish culture.

Such an approach to historical geography stands in contradiction with the assumptions adopted by the author at the beginning, when she decided to limit the area of her research to the Kingdom of Poland (p. 2). In truth, the tombstones discussed in the book make an impression of being randomly selected. Using data from the National Centre for Research and Documentation of Monuments, the author identified 333 children's tombstones in the territory of the present day Poland (pp. 8, 9, 157), yet in her catalogue she included only 45 of them, failing to provide the criteria for her selection. On page 13 she stated that in the catalogue she had included only tombstones from the territory of the Kingdom of Poland, whereas in reality, the catalogue also contains three such monuments from Silesia, two from Lithuania, and one from Pomerania. The catalogue is not limited to one type of monuments – next to the most characteristic tombstones with the representation of a *putto* reclining on a skull, it also contains tombstones with dressed figures, depicting the deceased as standing or kneeling, as well as family tombs depicting children with parents. These are not exclusively preserved works, or those the author had a chance to view herself. Not only do presented works fail to prove the exceptionality of Polish culture, but they also prevent one from arriving at any conclusions whatsoever. Based on this sample, the author attempts to analyse the distribution of tombstones within the space of a church (p. 143, 175), but she is not always capable of determining their original location. She describes the tombstones of the Ocieski and Grot families as originally located in the cloisters of the Cracow's Dominican monastery, whereas they were transferred to that location from the church<sup>31</sup>, while Łabno recognises the tombstone's location outside of the presbytery to be equally prestigious as inside (p. 293). In the context of the main thesis, analyses of distribution of tombstones against the background of the present administrative division of Poland (p. 153, 173), which is obviously significantly less adequate than the historical boundaries rejected by the author, are even more bizarre. Furthermore, the conclusions that may be drawn from the presented statistics firmly negate the book's thesis,

argue, that it is cultural and possibly confessional borders that are relevant in such discussion, not political ones". (p. 203).

<sup>31</sup> The author used the work of S. STAROWOLSKI, *Monumenta Sarmatarum*, Cracoviae 1655, yet she failed to draw any conclusions from the fact that the mentioned tombstones had been described in that work as located inside the church.



10. The tombstone of Benedetto Iordano, Dominican church in Genoa (S. Maria di Castello) (photo: M. Kurzej)



11. The tombstone of Richard Benefeld, post-Benedictine church (presently a Cathedral) in Southwark (London) (photo: K. Blaschke)



12. The image in the top of the epitaph of Hans Imhof's family, church of St. Sebald in Nuremberg (photo: M. Kurzej)

according to which children's tombstones are to be a Polish cultural phenomenon. The statistics seem to indicate that, for example, they decisively enjoyed greater popularity in Silesia, where generally more tombstones were preserved than in Poland, which first and foremost reflects the demographic and economic differences between these countries. In the Lower Silesian Voivodeship, the tombstones of children constitute 10.7% of all tombstones while in the Opole Voivodeship 9.1%, in turn in the provinces located predominantly within the territory of former Poland this coefficient is 4.4% in the Greater Poland Voivodeship, 2.4% in the Holy Cross (Świętokrzyskie) and Subcarpathian Voivodeships, 1.2% in the Lesser Poland Voivodeship, and 0% in the Lublin Voivodeship. Admittedly, the author did notice this disproportion, yet she arrived at a conclusion that the custom of commemorating children had spread from Poland to Silesia since tombstones located in Poland are older (pp. 160, 163). Yet, the data collected by the author shows that Polish examples are more numerous than Silesian only up to the 4<sup>th</sup> decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century whereas in Silesia children's tombstones appeared already around the time when the Jagiellonian dynasty lost control over the region. Moreover, the author did not even attempt to establish whether the custom of commemorating children could have arrived in Silesia from another direction<sup>32</sup>, since the scope of her interest failed to include Bohemia, Aus-

tria, and German lands. Neither did she try to explain how deceased children had been commemorated in Hungary, despite the fact that the inscription on the tombstone of Katarzyna Pilecka states directly that it had been erected in keeping with the Hungarian customs, while Krzysztof Szydłowiecki, the creator of the family mausoleum in Opatow, also had very strong ties with Hungary<sup>33</sup>. Apart from this, the European context is not at all present in the book, which probably results from the fact that the author treats the connection between the occurrence of children's tombstones as a preliminary assumption, but not as a thesis which she should endeavour to prove<sup>34</sup>.

The book also contains serious errors in the interpretative layer. Instead of comparing the attitude to children in Poland and, for instance, in Hungary, Bohemia, Scandinavia, or other European countries in the Modern Era, the author seeks the key for the interpretation of Polish children's tombstones in the customs of societies substantially more remote both in terms of time and geography. Therefore, she presents a review of funereal customs from the Early Palaeolithic (p. 112), analyses the concept of Mother Earth in the Late Palaeolithic (p. 224), she extensively discusses beliefs and customs of ancient Egyptians (p. 112, 113, 115, 116, 122, 124, 227), but also of the Shona people of Zimbabwe and the Kotas people from Southern India (p. 137). Interpretation of children's tombstones in the context of elements of gro-

<sup>32</sup> Łabno claims that Lutheran societies outside of Silesia discouraged commemorating children, invoking the law of 1754, prohibiting mourning after children and erecting tombstones for children, yet she fails to say where such a law was in force (p. 163).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. J. KIESZKOWSKI, *Kanclerz Krzysztof Szydłowiecki. Z dziejów kultury i sztuki zygmontowskich czasów*, Poznań 1912, pp. 345, 465.

<sup>34</sup> "Key questions addressed in this book include: (...) What factors enabled the genre to flourish in Poland and not elsewhere?" (p. 2).





13. The figures of the deceased on the tombstone of the Tęczyński family, church of Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (photo: M. Kurzej)

tesque present in some funereal rites (pp. 231–248) is entirely absurd, all the more so that the author failed to demonstrate their occurrence in Poland. In turn, the book contains no references to Catholic eschatology, while discussing the entire gamut of functions held by tombstones, the author passes the most obvious one in silence – i.e. the religious, limited to Catholic tombstones, and in practice most often distinguishing the Polish examples she discusses from the Silesian ones. It is possible to assume that the Catholic tombstone of a child was not only to help preserve the memory of the deceased child or come as an expression of parents' grief, but also to encourage prayers for the deliverance of the child's soul. Since children had little time to perpetrate many sins, their souls could quickly leave Purgatory, and then they would be able to intercede on behalf of the living members of the family who took care to properly commemorate the bodies they had left behind.

The author devotes most attention to tombstones with representations of a *putto* reclining on a skull. This group contains six examples already indicated by Kołakowska<sup>35</sup>. Łabno did not find any new works that could be classified within this group, yet she attempted to incorrectly extend it by examples which in fact represent another type of iconography. These examples include the tombstone of Anna Sułkowska, who was presented as an adult – in a long dress and a cape, with covered head and holding a book in her hand. The author, however, defined this representation as “the clothed *putto*”, claiming that it is a culmination of the iconographic type being discussed (pp. 179, 192, 193). Yet, she did not embark on an attempt to locate the tombstones

with the representation of *putto* in the context of other works with similar iconography, despite the fact that she remarked that this motif had become popular thanks to the graphic patterns popular in all of Europe (p. 102). Admittedly, the use of this pattern in the role of an image of a specific child is an original solution indeed, with the earliest examples hailing from Poland (p. 106), yet, as already mentioned, it was known also outside of Poland [Fig. 7]. It is necessary to remember as well that by the application of such iconography, the death of a specific child was attempted to be portrayed as a general allegory of vanity and transience, therefore the function of the image of a *putto* with a skull on a child's tombstone does not in principle differ from its use on tombstones of adults. Two Polish works of this type had already been indicated by Kołakowska<sup>36</sup>, and numerous foreign examples can be added thereto. At least four such tombstones can be found in Genoa alone: that of Cipriano Pallavicino in the cathedral, dating from 1575, that of Geronimo Chiavari in the church of the Holy Annunciation from 1594, and that of the Iordano couple in the Dominican church, dating from 1604 [Fig. 10]. Among North European examples it suffices to mention the epitaph of Richard Benefeld, † 1615, in Southwark [Fig. 11], or the family of Hans Imhof in the Nuremberg's church of St. Sebaldus from 1628 [Fig. 12].

Assuming that the author indeed wanted to discuss children's tombstones in the territory of Poland, one must notice that she omitted several very interesting examples, including the legendary tombstone of two children of the

<sup>35</sup> M. KOŁAKOWSKA, *Renesansowe nagrobki*, p. 251. They are tombstones of Rafał Ocieski in Kraków, Krzysztof Herburt in Felsztyn, Katarzyna Pilecka in Pilica, Jan Modliszewski in Łomża, Stanisław Radziwiłł in Ołyka, and Sebastian Lubomirski in Dobczyce.

<sup>36</sup> M. KOŁAKOWSKA, *Renesansowe nagrobki*, p. 250. They are tombstones of the Branicki family in Niepołomice and the Firlej family in Bejsce.



14. Epitaph of Anna and Mikołaj Ożarowski, parish church in Igołomia (photo: M. Kurzej)

Tęczyński family in Kraśnik<sup>37</sup> [Fig. 13], the epitaph of Anna and Mikołaj Ożarowski in Igołomia [Fig. 14], interesting in iconographic terms, where the images of the deceased siblings had been incorporated into the depiction of the scene *Let the little children come to me*, or epitaph of two Adam Drzewicki in Drzewica from 1604, where grandfather and grandson are figured in the same way – kneeling in front of the crucifix<sup>38</sup>. It is fitting to add that caesuras of the study adopted by the author (1500–1650) do not apply to the material presented, since the oldest examples she discusses date only from the second decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, whereas tombstones similar to those included [in the work] were also produced after mid-1600, a good example

of which is the monument of Piotr Chronowski in Uniejów near Miechów, dating from 1677.

The book contains numerous erroneous statements on specific issues. Interpreting tombstones featuring a standing figure of a child as an expression of the Lutheran doctrine of redemption through faith (p. 160) also stirs reservations. They were popular in German lands, indeed, yet they were accompanied by tombstones with the image of the deceased kneeling in front of the crucifix. Furthermore, tombstones with standing figures were already popular in the Middle Ages while later they were considered appropriate also for Catholic hierarchs<sup>39</sup>. All said, such an interpretation stands in contradiction with an even more bizarre opinion expressed in another place of the book (p. 155), where the author, referring to the example of Gdansk, claims that protestant epitaphs mostly consisted of only an inscription

<sup>37</sup> J. KOWALCZYK, *Legenda o pomniku Jana Baptysty Tęczyńskiego i królowy Cecylii w Kraśniku*, “Biuletyn Historii Sztuki”, 48, 1986, pp. 263–276.

<sup>38</sup> W. ŁUSZCZKIEWICZ, [Rysunki nagrobków z XVI w. zebrane przez Wyspiańskiego], “Sprawozdania Komisji do Badania Historii Sztuki w Polsce”, 4, 1891, p. LXV.

<sup>39</sup> Numerous examples of episcopal tombstones with the standing image of the deceased may be encountered in German lands (e.g. in Bamberg and Würzburg), but also in Nagyszombat, in the historical territory of Hungary.

plaque, without the image of the deceased. Yet, in the very church of St. Mary in Gdansk, there are many sumptuous tombstones with rich figural ornamentation and images of the deceased in a variety of conventions. They include a particularly splendid tombstone of the Bahr family the author should be familiar with as with an analogy to the Kos family monument in Oliva she discusses. Tombstones with figures are present also in other protestant countries, among which it suffices to mention the Netherlands, Sweden, and England. The author's profound ignorance in the area of comparative material is also attested by her recognition of the monument of the Kos family as the earliest tombstone featuring kneeling figures in Europe (p. 211)<sup>40</sup>.

The author also committed multiple errors in interpreting elements of individual tombstones. One of these errors comes in her recognising the wreaths held by the children on the tombstones of Pilecka and Herbut as poppy leaves and symbolising sleep (pp. 187, 225) while by the shape of the leaves and buds one may easily recognise the ornament as laurel leaves. Describing a fine plant motif in tombstone finials as a palm, meant to symbolise the inclusion of the children into the community of the Saint Innocents murdered by Herod<sup>41</sup>, is another of such errors. Putting aside the fact that the ornament mentioned by the author is hardly reminiscent of a palm, it is necessary to remember that the Catholic Church worshipped the victims of the King of Judea as saint martyrs, thus equating them with children who died of natural causes would be simply absurd. Another abuse comes as the recognition of Piotr Karczewski's necklace on his tombstone in Karczew as a torque, reminding of the Sarmatian origins of the deceased, since such ornaments had been worn by barbarian tribes inhabiting the lands north of the Roman Empire (s. 190). Moreover, the dragon coiled around the coat of arms on tombstones of the Szydłowiecki family in Opatów certainly is not an attribute of Kronos/Saturn<sup>42</sup>, but a distinction in the form of the Order of Dragon emblem bestowed on Krzysztof Szydłowiecki by Emperor Maximilian<sup>43</sup>. Neither is it true that Jerzy Sieniawski was depicted naked on his tombstone (p. 322) and the inscription from his tombstone is not known<sup>44</sup>. Allowing

the interpretation of images of the three children of the Modliszewski family on their tombstone in Łomża as personification of the virtues or mourners (p. 313) is yet another misunderstanding because they were expressly provided with names of the deceased [Fig. 2].

The book was published by Ashgate, a prestigious publishing house with renown, and due to the use of hardback and art paper it may give an impression of a luxury publication. In truth, however, the editorial level also leaves a lot to be desired. In the case of a work in the area of art history, scantiness of illustrative material features among the most serious shortcomings. The book at issue contains only 31 photographs (including 13 in colour), therefore, more than a half of the works included in the catalogue were not illustrated at all. Furthermore, the photographs taken by the author herself are of poor quality.

Sadly, there are substantiated fears that Jeannie Łabno's book is a symptom of a deeper crisis affecting the area of humanities in Europe. This is undoubtedly related to the so-called Bologna Process, as a result of which higher degrees in a given discipline may be obtained while omitting the lower degrees, where students should obtain the knowledge of basic facts and research methods. As a result, a substantial decline in the level of degree dissertations may be observed, next to the phenomenon of publishing works which should have never been approved and defended. The author's errors serve to discredit not only herself, but also the promoter and reviewers who approved such a dissertation for defence and publication. They come as an evocative testament to the weakness of the entire academia, most apparently lacking people capable of competently evaluating a work related to the range of issues from Central and Eastern Europe. Paradoxically, this way at least one of the conclusions presented gains confirmation. The author employs an apt term of "forgotten Renaissance" to describe Polish art of the 16<sup>th</sup> century which used to be passed over in silence in globally-recognised textbooks and syntheses. This definition could be successfully extended to other European countries or applied to other areas of art. Although the book here discussed will not contribute to the improvement of this state of affairs, it nevertheless emphatically proves that the issues of Central and Eastern Europe are still hugely neglected by Western researchers.

<sup>40</sup> The falseness of this sentence is proved by such famous works as the tombstone of Maximilian I in Innsbruck or Henri II in Saint-Denis.

<sup>41</sup> "The palm symbolises innocence and signifies that these children should be numbered among the 144,000 children below the age of two years who were killed by Herod and redeemed by Christ, thus offering some consolation to the grieving parents" (p. 188).

<sup>42</sup> "In fourth and fifth centuries, writers provided Kronos/Saturn with the attribute of a snake or dragon biting its tail so as to emphasise his temporal significance. Interestingly, this is the symbol for the herb on the Szydłowiecki monuments" (p. 230).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. J. KIESZKOWSKI, *Kanclerz*, p. 204.

<sup>44</sup> The author defines the inscription as illegible ("cannot read from photocopy", p. 321), whereas its content and clear photographs of the tombstone were already published in 2007 (R. NESTOROW,

*Kościół zamkowy w p.w. św. Trójcy Brzeżanach*, [in:] *Materiały do dziejów sztuki sakralnej na ziemiach wschodnich dawnej Rzeczypospolitej*, ed. by J. K. Ostrowski, part 1: *Kościół i klasztor dawnego województwa ruskiego*, vol. 15, Kraków 2007, p. 99).