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THE LATIN INSCRIPTIONS IN THE ROYAL PALACE ON THE WAWEL HILL IN CRACOW

The Renaissance Royal Palace on the Wawel Hill in Cracow was erected by the Polish King Sigismund I between 1502 and 1536 (fig. 1). It was built in several stages (under direct supervision, if not by the Italian masters themselves) with a rich decor of paintings and sculptures, the bulk of which were finished between 1520 and 1536¹. Large fragments of the decorations have survived and their missing parts can be reconstructed on the basis of written sources, at least as far as their iconography is concerned. Having analyzed all the available evidence, it is possible to conclude that the decoration was dominated by three fundamental themes: political-dynastic, astrological, and philosophical-moral, the third being perhaps the most extensive and most interesting². An important portion of the decorations preserved inside the residence consisted of Latin inscriptions over portals and windows. Recent literature on the subject barely mentions these inscriptions while visitors over the past centuries regarded them as highly significant. For instance, Martin Zeiller in his *Itinerarium* (1632) devotes only a few lines to the Wawel Palace, one of which stresses that ‘there are beautiful chambers and almost every one bears a beautiful Latin inscription in gilt’ and in *Variorum in Europa itinerum deliciae* (1594) by Nathan Chytraeus, which com-

¹ The research and literature on the subject so far can be found in Jan BIAŁOSTOCKI, *The Art of the Renaissance in Eastern Europe, Hungary, Bohemia, Poland*, Oxford, 1976, pp. 18-25.

² See: Stanisław MOSSAKOWSKI, *Sztuka jako świadectwo czasu. Studia z pogranicza historii sztuki i historii idei*, Warszawa, 1980, pp. 95-149 (partly repeated in articles by the same author: “La non più esistente decorazione astrologica del castello reale di Cracovia”, in: *Magia, astrologia e religione del Rinascimento*, Wrocław, 1974, pp. 90-98; *Ethos of the Royal Palace in Cracow*, Polish Art Studies, vol. 3, 1982, pp. 35-45).



1. Courtyard of the Royal Palace on the Wawel Hill at Cracow

piles Latin inscriptions from almost all of Europe, including those from Polish towns, the contents of several maxims from the Wawel are quoted.

Latin maxims were placed inside the palace almost throughout the entire period of its construction during the reign of Sigismund I (1506-1548). They can be found on the Gothic-Renaissance portals from the late-medieval workshop of Benedykt of Sandomierz (1520-1529) as well as over windows of the southern wing erected by the Italian Renaissance sculptor Bartolommeo Berrecci (1530-1536). Many of them were damaged along with the original Renaissance portals, as, for example, in the section that was given a new Baroque finish after a fire at the end of the 16th century. Also destroyed were most of the original window cornices on the external wall of the palace which possibly had some maxims as well. The most rapid deterioration was suffered not by inscriptions carved in stone but by those painted on surfaces. Only one of the latter has survived – the one over the main gate portal: SI DEVS NOBISCVM QVIS CONTRA NOS (*Ep. ad Romanos*, cap. VIII, 31). But there must have been more of them since payment receipts from a 1611 report mention an unscrupulous painter who ‘blotted out inscriptions over doors’ while renovating the Melusine Drawing Room and adjacent chambers.

The placing of Latin maxims in the decoration of the Wawel stemmed from a fashion that Sigismund I could have come into contact with in Buda (Hungary) at the court of his brother King Vladislav, between 1499 and 1501. The fashion spread in the countries north of the Alps, in particular, where – to quote Erwin Panofsky – “Inscriptions held more interest than images, and images were appreciated as iconographical puzzles and sources of historical information, rather than as work of art”³. He emphasized also that the new intelligentsia shared literary rather than visual taste and felt more at home in the realm of words and ideas than in the world of forms and colors, and thus for Erasmus of Rotterdam, Pliny’s *Historia naturalis* was worth more than all the works of sculptors and painters referred to therein⁴. Inscriptions were also of interest to Italian humanists, who were primarily preoccupied with the texts on ancient monuments. Collections of Latin maxims also existed in Poland; Piotr Tomicki, a bishop and Royal Chancellor, was an avid collector of them and used to send letters to Stanisław of Rzeszyca, a Polish envoy to Rome, requesting the most expedient provision of texts of such inscriptions on the buildings of the Eternal City⁵. Brief, forceful maxims,

³ Erwin PANOFSKY, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*, Princeton, 1955, pp. 30-31, 175.

⁴ Erwin PANOFSKY, “Erasmus and the Visual Arts”, in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 32, 1969, p. 204.

⁵ See: Leszek HAJDUKIEWICZ, *Księgozbiór i zainteresowania bibliofilskie Piotra Tomickiego na tle jego działalności kulturalnej*, Wrocław, 1961, pp. 47-48.

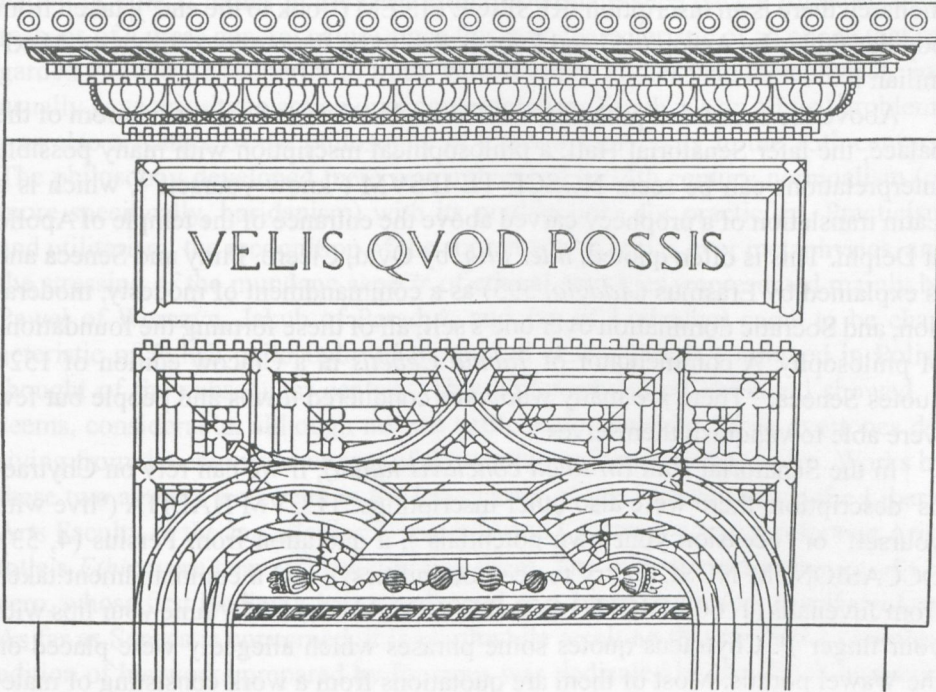
approaching in clarity those of ancient times, generally played an important role in contemporary intellectual life. As implied by Marcin Kromer's address at the funeral of King Sigismund I, the monarch used to cite from memory excerpts from the Holy Scriptures and appropriate moral maxims on various occasions⁶. They could not, therefore, be absent from the decoration of his main residence.

The problem of the Latin inscriptions at the Wawel Palace is also linked to the matter of their form. All of them were made in more or less carefully executed antique capital letters (similar to *capitalis quadrata*), with lettering re-introduced by humanists and studied by scholars and artists, including Leonardo and Dürer. Just as Humanism, an intellectual movement based on literary culture, was ahead of the renaissance of antiquity in the arts, it was also no coincidence that the revived *litterae antiquae* were the harbingers of the Renaissance forms in visual arts in Poland, first appearing in the late-Gothic works by Veit Stoss, then on the tombstone of bishop Piotr of Bnin (1494), and on the epitaph of Philip Buonaccorsi (*Callimachus*) (ca. 1502). The Wawel maxims were addressed first of all to the King himself, to the royal family and the court as well as to senators and deputies and to a great number of familiar and unfamiliar visitors, since – as Stanisław Orzechowski (1548) reports – ‘King Sigismund would graciously give ear to anyone; his edifices, chambers and the most secret sanctuaries were open to all, he actually exposed his home to a public view throughout his lifetime’⁷.

The maxims had multiple functions. The majority of them, while expressing some general thoughts, were closely related to the utilitarian aspects of the quarters over the doors of which they were placed. Thus, for example, *loca secreta* were wittily given the following: NICHIL [!] SINE CAVSA (‘nothing without a cause’) and MORES AMICI MOVERIS NON ODERIS (‘you may change your friends’ habits but you cannot hate them’), the latter being a quotation from *Sententiae* by Publilius Syrus (A 56). A more serious tone can be observed in the inscriptions placed in the chambers on the first floor, close to the Gothic pavilion, where the King lived and handled matters of state. In the pavilion there is a quotation from Ovid's letters from Pont (2,2.113): TENDIT IN ARDVA VIRTUS (‘virtue tends toward the difficult’), and opposite it: VELIS QVOD POSSIS (‘want what you can’, fig. 2). Those coming to be received by the King would wait in what is now called the Grey Antechamber, where once there was an inscription on the portal: NE QVID NIMIS (‘nothing in excess’), which was a translation of a Greek inscription from the temple at Delphi attributed to one of the famous seven

⁶ Adolf PAWIŃSKI, *Młode lata Zygmunta Starego*, Warszawa, 1893, p. 68.

⁷ Stanisław ORZECZOWSKI, *Wybór pism*, ed. by Jerzy STARNAWSKI, Wrocław, 1972, p. 79.



2. Portal in the Wawel Palace

Sages, or possibly related to Pythagoras and its Latin version quoted, *inter alia*, by Cicero and Seneca, as we can learn from Erasmus' erudite commentary in his *Adagia* (596). Another entrance to the Grey Antechamber leads from the galleries through a portal with an inscription also taken from Seneca (*Troas*, II, 257): *MODERATA DVRANT* ('what is moderate, lasts').

Generally speaking, the contents of these inscriptions corresponded perfectly to King Sigismund's personality, whose prudence and procrastination at times is reported by many of his contemporaries. The King was notorious for his slow decision-making and for his profound consideration before taking any decisive step. Hence, it is not strange that one of the inscriptions on a portal in the second floor gallery reads: *QVOD RACIO [!] NEQVIT SEPE [!] SANAVIT MORA* ('what reason cannot do, delay will'). It is also a quotation from Seneca (*Agamemnon*, II, 130). Similar sentiments can be seen in the maxims found on the first floor in the south end of the east wing. The exit from the staircase into the gallery bears a quotation from Ovid (*Heroides*, 2, 85): *EXITVS ACTA PROBAT* ('result confirms action'), and above the entrance from the gallery to the chambers of the

monarch there is an inscription: RESPICE FINEM ('look to the end'), taken from popular fables by Aesop (45) and known also to be the motto of Emperor Maximilian I.

Above the portal that probably used to lead to the main reception room of the palace, the later Senatorial Hall, a philosophical inscription with many possible interpretations can be seen: NOSCE TE IPSVM ('know yourself'), which is a Latin translation of a prophecy carved above the entrance of the temple of Apollo at Delphi. This is often quoted, *inter alia*, by Ovid, Cicero, Pliny and Seneca and is explained by Erasmus (*Adagia*, 595) as a commandment of modesty, moderation, and Socratic domination over one's self, all of these forming the foundations of philosophy. A commentator of *Tabula Cebetis* in a Cracow edition of 1524 quotes Seneca: "There are many who have conquered towns and people but few were able to vanquish themselves".

In the Senatorial Hall (*in Regii conclavis ianua*), if we can rely on Chytraeus' description, there were also other inscriptions: TECVM HABITA ('live with yourself' or 'occasion your own potentials'), a quotation from Persius (4, 53), OCCASIONEM NOSCE ('try to see possibilities'), and a commandment taken from Juvenalis (1, 60): DIGITO COMPESCE LABELLVVM ('tame your lips with your finger')⁸. Chytraeus quotes some phrases which allegedly were placed on the Wawel portals. Most of them are quotations from a work consisting of materials extracted from Seneca's letters. The book, supplied with a commentary by Erasmus, was published in Cracow in 1532 by Maciej Szarffenberg, with a free translation into Polish⁹. These inscriptions include: IN ADVERSIS FORTIS, IN PROSPERIS CAVTVS (which the translator rendered as follows: 'in misery try to be strong while provident in happiness') and: CVNCTIS ESTO BENIGNVS, NEMINI BLANDVS, PAVCIS FAMILIARIS, OMNIBVS AEQVVS (translated as: 'be gracious to all, pay lip service to no one, do not acquaint to many men, be just to all and everyone'). Finally, a Late-Roman proverb, found above the entrance separating the galleries from the first wing of the palace in the new Renaissance style, is particularly significant: TEMPORA MVTANTVR ET NOS MVTAMVR IN ILLIS ('the times are changing and we are changing in times').

An overwhelming majority of these maxims are ethical in character which corresponds to the personality of King Sigismund, whose strong moral stance was confirmed by his contemporaries. At the same time, it appears that the domi-

⁸Nathan CHYTRAEUS, *Variorum in Europa itinerum deliciae*, Herbonae Nassoviorum, 1594, p. 797.

⁹Lucii Annei Senecae formula honestae vitae de quatuor virtutibus cardinalibus, iuxta Erasmi Roterodamensis castigationem emendata, scholiisque marginalibus et glossemate illustrata, Cracoviae 1532, 1541 (per Hieronymum Wietorem), fols. K-IV recto, S-I recto and verso.

nation of ethical issues in the texts from the Renaissance palace followed from reasons of a more general nature since this was characteristic of an epoch that regarded goodness as superior to truth, valued ethics higher than metaphysics, and usually gave priority to action over contemplation. Emphasis on ethical problems was also a feature of the philosophy of Cracow University in the 15th century. The philosophy developed there was influenced by 14th century nominalism (or more specifically, buridanism) with its predilections for practicisim. Practicisim and utilitarianism, the recognition of the supremacy of ethics over metaphysics, and the stressing of the mundane aspects of ethical activities (represented mainly by Paweł of Worczyn, Jakub of Paradyż, and Jan of Ludzisko) came to be characteristic of Polish philosophy of the period. These trends continued in Polish thought of the subsequent century. This philosophical-ethical trend showed, it seems, considerable, although not yet sufficiently analyzed, Stoic overtones deriving from the enormous impact of the writings of Seneca and Cicero. Works by these two authors were read in the last quarter of the 15th century at the Liberal Arts Faculty of the Jagiellonian University and Cracow's commentators on Aristotle's *Ethic* were heavily dependent on them. The wide-spread influence of Cicero, whose first leading admirer in Poland was Jan of Ludzisko, is self-evident. As far as Seneca is concerned, it is worthwhile recalling that in 1529 a complete edition of his works prepared by Erasmus was dedicated by the Dutch humanist to the Bishop of Cracow, Piotr Tomicki.

Therefore it is not surprising that in the selection of the Wawel inscriptions one can clearly sense ethical beliefs of a Stoic nature. It is also probable that the images of the three Graces, painted in King Sigismund's bathroom, were conceived as an illustration of the virtue of generosity (*liberalitas, generositas*) which consists of the unrelenting giving, receiving, and returning of benefits (*gratias agere*). This corresponded to the well-known opinion of Seneca (*De beneficiis*, I, 3), and additionally, such an interpretation of the Graces was prevalent among the humanists personally acquainted with the King. The *ex-libris* of doctor Joannes Cuspinianus, who played a considerable role in the Hapsburg-Jagiellonian contacts at the time of the Vienna Congress in 1515, was embellished with images of the Charities supplemented with appropriate subtitles: DO, ACCIPIO, REFERO ('I give', 'I accept', 'I return', fig. 3).

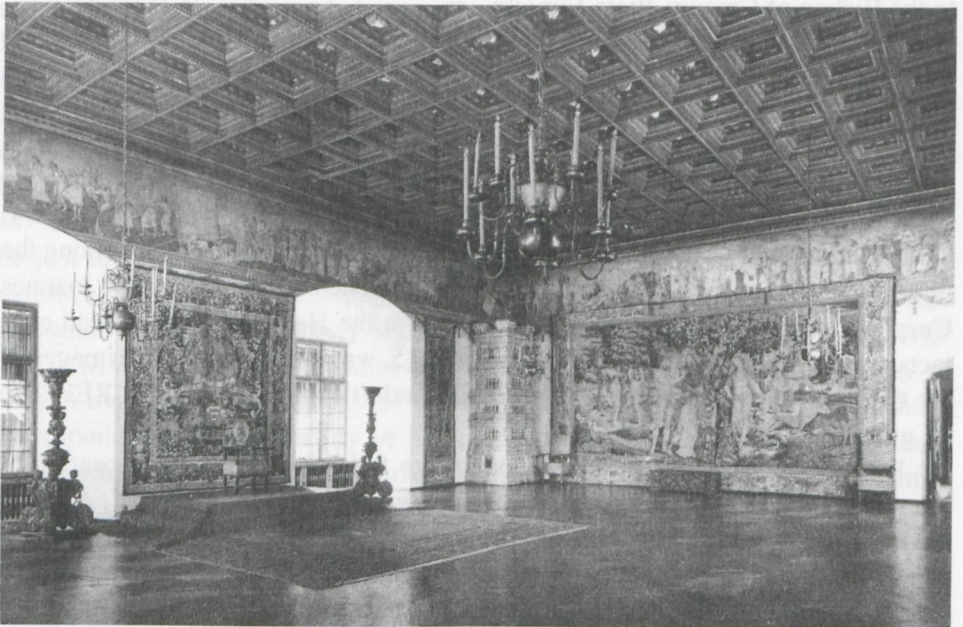
Ethical beliefs based on Stoic thought are fully voiced in the decoration of the most magnificent room in the palace known as the 'Hall of Heads'. A prime example is the frieze painted in 1533 (fig. 4). The work could be included among Renaissance paintings (such as Botticelli's famous *Calumnia*) which attempt to reconstruct ancient artworks on the basis of descriptions in antique literary texts (ἔκφρασις). In this case, the work is a reconstruction of an allegorical picture

CVSPINIANVS VT FVRES SI POSSET A R
CEAT. HIC SVAM IMAGINEM LOCAVIT.

3. *Ex libris* of Ioannes Cuspinianus



Hinc compefce manum, ne fur dicaris / ab illa
Que ueri faciem pagina reddit Heri.



4. 'Hall of Heads' in the Wawel Palace

which was said to have been donated to the temple of Chronos by Cebes, a philosopher from Pythagoras' school. The description and explanation of the painting is the subject of an anonymous dialogue in Greek from the first century A.D. – during the era of Humanism ascribed to Cebes from Thebes, a disciple of Socrates mentioned in Plato's works.

This dialogue, pronouncedly moralizing, translated towards the end of the 15th century into Latin as *Tabula Ceбетis*, enjoyed great popularity throughout the entire 16th century. The purpose of the work, and also the corresponding painting, is to show that the only aim of human life is the happiness that follows from a true viewing of all things and from knowledge about what goodness is. This is supplemented by the tendency towards virtues such as justice, fortitude, honesty, prudence, decency, freedom, temperance, and kindness. To follow these virtues, one must act in moderation and avoid sensual pleasures, accept gifts of fickle Fortune when she gives them but not despair when she takes them away, and, in terms of education (*artes liberales*), limit oneself only to what is morally useful. This way we can arrive at true knowledge independent of circumstances, in full control over ourselves, and consequently, in full control of our own destinies. One who has acquired such knowledge, we read in the dialogue, 'is above anything that brings sadness', 'is secure where ever he may be', 'reigns over everything like a king'. This sense of the text, and at the same time of the frieze, is concisely explained in a short commentary by Rodolphus Agricola, a professor of poetics in Cracow (1517-1521), placed on a plaque at the beginning of the frieze.

It is not difficult to notice that the ideals propagated by the text of the pseudo-Kebe and its Wawel illustration, i.e., control of one's self, dependence on destiny, indifference to values which are not considered virtues, and the links between virtue, independence and happiness, are all profoundly Stoic ideals. They may often be found in Renaissance Aristotelianism and also in the Polish philosophy of the epoch, as was already mentioned, e.g., in Grzegorz of Sanok, who, according to Callimachus, was a determined follower of the Stoic ethics and 'regarded all things beyond virtue as worthless'¹⁰. No wonder, therefore, that the dialogue of the pseudo-Kebe was very popular in Poland; three editions of it were published in the 16th century and the text was translated into Polish. Its influence can be observed quite early on in Ioannes Dantiscus' *De Virtutis et Fortunae differentia somnium* (Cracow 1510), where in the company of Virtue, which is juxtaposed

¹⁰ Philippi CALLIMACHI, *Vita et mores Gregorii Sanocei*, ed. Irena LICHONSKA, Warsaw 1963, p. 25.

