

***Krakow's Foundation Myth:  
An Indo-European theme through  
the eyes of medieval erudition***

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Vincent of Krakow is the most important intellectual figure of Poland in the beginning of the thirteenth century. His *Chronica polonorum siue originale regum et principum Poloniae* is a literary composition in four books, written as both a chronicle and dialogue. The first book narrates the legendary origins of Poland, and contains the mythical story of the foundation of Krakow discussed in the present article, the struggle between the hero and the dragon. This myth has attracted the attention of various researchers, whose approaches to the above-mentioned narrative have ranged from stressing the Indo-European origin of the myth to underlining the Classical sources from which the retired bishop of Krakow may have taken his inspiration. In general, the arguments for Indo-European origin seem stronger than the arguments for medieval erudition.

Vincent of Krakow, also known by his Polish name Wincenty Kadłubek, or its Latinized form Magister Vincentius, was born in Karwów (c. 1161) to a noble family. He received a high degree of education, certainly studying in Bologna and possibly in Paris. Upon the death of Fulk, twelfth bishop of Krakow, he was elected to the vacant see (1207); in 1218 he resigned and took vows as a Cistercian monk in the monastery of Jędrzejów. He died in 1223. In 1764, he was beatified by Pope Clement XIII. His *Chronica polonorum siue originale regum et principum Poloniae* is a literary composition in four books, written, in generic terms, as both a chronicle and dialogue. The first book narrates the legendary origins of Poland, and contains the mythical story of the foundation of Krakow discussed in the present article. The second book is intended as a continuation of Gallus Anonymus' *Chronica polonorum*. The third and fourth books narrate events contemporary with Vincent himself. Book Four closes with the rule of Mieszko III the Old, which ended in 1202, on this basis the most plausible

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date for the work's composition. The first three books are written in dialogic form between Bishop Matthew of Krakow (1145-1165), who narrates historical events, and Archbishop John of Gniezno (1148-1165), who extracts the moral lessons from the narration. The work was an extremely popular one, and had an extraordinary impact upon the political ideology of Low Medieval and Renaissance Poland.

The myth of the foundation of Krakow as told in the *Chronica Polonorum* I.5-7<sup>1</sup> narrates the return of the hero Graccus I from a mythical land to Poland, to give laws to the natives of his country.<sup>2</sup> He is accordingly a typical culture hero.

Graccus I has two sons, the younger of whom also bears this name, so that it is necessary to distinguish between Graccus I and Graccus II. The chief obstacle to the well-being of the kingdom is the monster Holophagus — the name simply describing his voracity — who is devastating the region.<sup>3</sup> The monster lives in the cliffs of a mountain, and the inhabitants of the surrounding area are forced at intervals to sacrifice to him a set number of livestock in order to gratify his appetite for flesh. If this toll is not met, the monster consumes an equivalent number of human beings. Given the gravity of the situation, Graccus I proposes to his sons that succession should fall upon the one who defeats the monster. The sons then defeat the monster by means of a ruse that takes advantage of his voracity: in place of the livestock that is normally the monster's due, they set a skin full of burning sulphur that the Holophagus greedily gobbles; the Holophagus then dies of suffocation from the smoke of the flames inside.<sup>4</sup> The younger son, however — Graccus II — then kills the elder, and claims the merit of having defeated the monster.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Here follow the editions of Bielowski (1872: 256-257) and Plezia (1994).

<sup>2</sup>*Vnde a Carintia rediens Graccus, ut erat sententioso beatus sermone, agmen omne in concionem uocat, omnium in se ora conuertit, omnium uenatur fauorem, omnium sibi conciliat obsequia (...). Proinde rex ab omnibus consalutatur; iura instituit, leges promulgat. Sic ergo nostri ciuilius iuris nata est conceptio, seu concepta natiuitas. (...).*

<sup>3</sup>*Erat enim in cuiusdam scopuli anfractibus monstrum atrocitatis immanissimae, quod quidam holophagum dici putant. Huius uoracitati singulis heptadibus secundum dierum supputationem certus numerus armentorum debebatur; quae nisi accolae, quasi quasdam uictimae obtulissent, humanis totidem capitibus a monstro plecterentur.*

<sup>4</sup>*Coria enim armentorum, accenso plena sulphure, loco solito pro armentis collocant, quae dum auidissime glutit holophagus, exhalantibus intro flammis suffocatur.*

<sup>5</sup>*Moxque iunior, tam uictoriae quam regni, non quasi consortem, sed aemulum fratrem occupat ac trucidat. Cuius funus crocodilinis prosequitur lacrimis, a monstro*

When the deceit is exposed, he is punished and condemned to perpetual exile. Archbishop John's moral reflections upon the tale then follow, and occupy all of chapter I.6. These are then followed in turn by the tale of the foundation of Krakow on the site where the monster had lived.<sup>6</sup>

This myth has attracted the attention of various researchers, whose approaches to the above-mentioned narrative have — as the title of the present article indicates — ranged from stressing the Indo-European origin of the myth to underlining the Classical sources from which the retired bishop of Krakow may have taken his inspiration.

Ivanov and Toporov (1974: 175-177) have seen in the fight of the hero Graccus with the Holophagus a manifestation of an ancient Indo-European myth, which they seek to schematize as the fight of the Storm God against the Serpent. In their interpretation, Graccus represents the Slavic deity of thunder, Perun, who — according to their reconstruction of the essential cosmogonic myth of Slavic paganism — fights against the Serpent, his archenemy, here identified with the god Veles/Volos. The latter, as described in legends dated later than the lifetime of Vincent of Krakow, lived in Wawel, a small hill where the castle of Krakow stands. In the view of Ivanov and Toporov, there exists an etymological relationship between “Wawel” and “Veles”/“Volos”. As will be described below, however, the theory ignores several details of the legend of the fight against the monster with regard both to its general reconstruction and to specific aspects of the myth as it appears in Vincent of Krakow.

A contrasting scholarly perspective on the myth, however, emphasizes instead Vincent of Krakow's status as a distinguished representative of the twelfth-century Renaissance. This line of enquiry accordingly directs its attention to the influence upon the foundation narrative of contemporary cultural factors well attested elsewhere in his writings. The most notable proponent of this argument is Kürbis (1976:165), Vincent's translator into Polish (Kürbis 2003). Kürbis identifies three main motivations for the inclusion of the fight against Holophagus in the work. Of these, the most important is didactic: the author is attempting

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*mentitur occisum, a patre tamen gratulanter, quasi uictor, excipitur.*

<sup>6</sup>*Immo in scopulo holophagi mox fundata est urbis insignis, a nomine Gracci dicta Graccouia, ut aeterna Graccus uiueret memoria*

to answer questions concerning the origin of Poland raised by the participants in the dialogue. The second motivation is moralising: the fight for power can lead to fratricide. Of only tertiary importance is the motif of victory over a monster achieved through a ruse. In Kürbis' account, the presence of the Holophagus is merely a pretext designed to display the paternal care of Graccus I for his subjects and to illustrate the duties of the good ruler — his character here being contrasted with that of his son, Graccus II, overwhelmed by the desire for power. In any case, Kürbis categorically rejects the notion that the legends collected by Vincent had any traditional origin.

In order to discriminate carefully between these positions, it will be necessary to adopt a very exacting methodology based upon as precise an identification as possible of every rhetorical element in the narrative — or, at least, of those elements potentially derived from those Classical authors of whom our bishop may have been aware. This methodology will also serve to reveal those elements that, if found in other Indo-European traditions clearly unknown to Vincent, could only have had their origin in the oral tradition.

Considering the first group of arguments, it will first be necessary to examine the phraseological elements already analysed by Balzer (1934-1935). These relate mainly to relatively inconsequential aspects of the narrative: the expression *singulis heptadibus* has its origin in Macrobius' *Commentarium in somnium Scipionis* 1.6.45 and 75; the nature of crocodile tears (*crocodilinis lacrimis*) is described in the *Physiologus* and in medieval bestiaries. A slightly more significant element — the fact that the name of the monster, *Holophagus*, is a conspicuous Hellenism — may be inspired by the term *ichthyophagus*, found in Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* 6.26.

Baudouin de Courtenay-Jędrzejewiczowa (1954-55) draws a parallel between the fight of the hero against the monster with the fight of Saint George with the dragon as collected in Jacob de Voragine's *Legenda aurea*. There are, however, many points of divergence between the two narratives. For a start, there are two heroes in Vincent's narration, rather than one. More importantly, the monster is defeated not after bold combat on the hero's part, but instead by an ingenious, if arguably cowardly, ruse. In this sense, the narrative differs radically from other Classical myths of which Vincent might have been aware, such as the combat of Apollo with the

Python, as described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 1.438-451, or the fight of Perseus and the monster,<sup>7</sup> at *Ov. Met.* 4.663-771.

A far from insignificant element of the myth is its causal connection with the foundation of a city. This aspect of the myth may have as a direct precedent Virgil's description of the struggle between Hercules and Cacus, similarly linked to the foundation of Rome. Verbal similarities between the two narratives can be identified — in *Aeneid* 8.192 Cacus lives in a cavern excavated from rock: *stat domus et scopuli ingentem traxere ruinam* — while the compound *holophagus* may have been inspired by Virgilian compounds related to Cacus at *Aeneid* 8.194 (*semihominis*) and 8.267 (*semiferi*).

On the other hand, that the foundation of the new city is accompanied by a fight between two brothers creates the suspicion that the author — who would have been fully aware of the myth of Romulus and Remus — may have deliberately inserted the topic of the fratricidal struggle for succession, with two ends in view. The first would be to establish a parallel between the foundation of Rome and that of Krakow, and thus to bestow the dignity of a classical precedent upon the Polish city — an alteration in keeping with the Latinization of Krak into Graccus. The second would be to motivate the various moralising reflections included in the speech of Archbishop John and developed through I.6.

Clearly, neither the textual nor literary considerations given above are sufficient to characterize the entire text as responding to humanist inspiration. True, Vincent of Krakow's writing is highly rhetorical in style. If deprived of its rhetorical aspects, however, the storyline appears schematic — much closer to orality than to a literary composition. It is also true that Vincent is an author with a double didactic and moralising aim, possessed of a wide humanistic culture that he wishes in all events to display. But these aims are more obviously in evidence in the dialogic reflections upon the myth. It is furthermore undeniable, as both Skibiński (1998) and Banaszkiewicz (1989, 1993, 2002) have noted, that archetypal aspects as well as oral tradition underlie the narrative — aspects which can be delineated most clearly through comparison with other Indo-European traditions not present in the Latin literature known to Vincent. The narration of the

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<sup>7</sup>The latter is, however, a sea monster, quite different from the Python, who similarly lives in a cavern excavated from a mountain.

fight against the dragon rests upon the basic semantic structure or theme HERO KILLS MONSTER, which can be exemplified in a variety of formulae, something like the superficial structure of the theme, as described by Watkins (1995).

On the other hand, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the theme is clearly framed between the stories of two culture heroes. As it is widely known, a culture hero is a mythical hero who changes the world by inventing or discovering something new, or founding or structuring a society. It is also well-established that ring composition is an extraordinarily ancient literary structure characteristic of orality.

The first culture hero is Graccus I. His name is clearly a Latinized version of the name of an ancient Slavic hero, unanimously reconstructed as Krak — particularly if one compares the equivalent culture hero of Bohemia, presented by Cosmas of Prague<sup>8</sup> with the Latinized name *Croccus*. Despite the fact that Cosmas of Prague predates Vincent of Krakow, there is no evidence that the latter knew the work of the former. Graccus I is a hero of the community to which he returns after spending some time abroad — according to Vincent, in Carinthia in particular — in order to defeat the enemies of his native land, be acclaimed as its first king, and give laws to his new nation.

The second culture hero is a woman, Vanda,<sup>9</sup> who possesses additional characteristics — inasmuch as these are the marked terms of comparison. Several specialists (von Gutschmidt 1857: 306, Balzer 1934: 97, Banaszkiwicz 1986: 62-64, Słupecki 1994: 196) have identified as a narrative parallel for Vanda the figure of Libuše — who, according to the foundation myth of the kingdom of Bohemia as related in Cosmas' *Chronica Bohemorum* 1.4, was Krok's younger daughter and successor. Like Libuše, Vanda stands in the relation of heir to her state's founder-hero — Krok, for Cosmas of Prague, or Krak, for Vincent — and they share certain features, such as beauty, wisdom, and good sense. Libuše, however, is also a prophetess, a feature hinted at but left undeveloped in Vincent's account.

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<sup>8</sup>*Chronica Bohemorum* 1, 3, ed. Bretholz (1923); see de Lazero (1999).

<sup>9</sup>*Tantus autem amor demortui principis senatum proceres, vulgus omne deuinxerat, ut unicam eius uirgunculam, cuius nomen Vanda, patris imperio surrogarent.*

Libuše's prophetic power is central to her most crucial ruling task — that of selecting, by virtue of her soothsaying capacity, Pøemyzl as the new king of the Bohemians when she finds him plowing the fields. The motif of the plowing king is broadly Indo-European, as exemplified in the tales of Cincinnatus, Wamba and in the *bylina* of Mikula.<sup>10</sup> In Vincent of Krakow's narrative, this motif is replaced by a story of frustrated love that will not be analysed further here. In her role as prophetess who intervenes to collaborate in the foundation of a new city, Vanda/Libuše closely corresponds to the Roman mythological figure of Egeria, consort of Numa Pompilius, second king of Rome. The aquatic character of the nymph Egeria<sup>11</sup> is paralleled by the association of Vanda with the Vistula river, as pointed out by Słupecki (1994: 196). Vincent may have been familiar with the story of Egeria through Livy's version of the tale. But all of Livy's less-serious motifs are absent from his narration, and it is only by comparing the three authors — Vincent, Cosmas and Livy — that we can reconstruct the myth in all its complexity.

These additional characteristics of the culture heroine close the circle of this composition which would further stress the oral substratum that lies at the core of the original legend. We will analyze now the mythic core of the combat against the monster. The themes that can appear in the myth have been carefully and concisely analysed by Fontenrose (1959: 9-11); and within Vincent's narrative, the following elements are evident:

The monster lives in a cavern in a mountain.

Nothing is said about its appearance, which is likened neither to a dragon nor a serpent; but it can be deduced that it is at any rate a monstrous figure. Its name does not refer to its physiognomy, but to its most immediately relevant feature, its voracity.

It is a despotic figure that imposes tribute to the inhabitants of the area.

Two culture heroes — brothers — take part in the fight.

The heroes prove their worth for the first time in confronting the monster.

The heroes kill the monster by means of a ruse, rather

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<sup>10</sup>See also Krappe (1919-1922) and Banaszkiwicz (1982).

<sup>11</sup>Livy 1.21.

than by direct and heroic combat or by using their preferred weapon. The use of a decoy is a typical feature of culture heroes who display the characteristics of what in comparative mythology is called a *trickster* — that is to say, heroes who achieve their aim by means of a trick.

The monster is defeated by a trick played upon its voracity.

To celebrate the victory over the monster the hero founds a new city.

The myth, however, exhibits conspicuous deviations from well-defined recurrent themes within the Indo-European tradition.

First, the culture hero Krak/Graccus is resolved into two characters: Krak I, the first legislator and king of Poland; and his son Krak II, who illegitimately claims victory over the monster after killing his brother and cheating his father. It is infrequent in mythic families that the younger son bears the same name as the father, and it is thus quite plausible that Vincent of Krakow introduces this ancestral doubling chiefly in order to motivate a moralising and didactic gloss in the commentary on the topic of fratricidal strife — which was a condition entirely unacceptable to a late twelfth-century bishop, despite Kürbis' insistence on the non-religious purpose of his work.

Once his fratricide and deception have been discovered, Krak II is punished with perpetual exile. Exile as purificatory punishment for murder is a well-defined motif in the Indo-European oral tradition, and one closely linked to the struggle of the hero against the monster: according to Plutarch's *Moralia* 293c, Apollo runs to Tempe after killing the Python; similarly, Indra must go into exile for purification after killing Vr tra, as narrated in *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 1.6.4.1. Both of these exiles, however, occur as a direct result of the monster's death, and neither bears any relation to the story of two brothers in contention for the throne.

We have already spoken about the possible literary origins of the theme of fratricidal struggle. The setting of the theme of fratricidal brothers within the myth of a fight against a monster accomplished by means of a ruse also raises the suspicion of learned manipulation of the material, as the co-existence of these two themes is unusual in a narrative of this type. The Indo-European formula, as reconstructed by Watkins

(1995: 361) allows for a further development:

HERO<sub>1</sub> KILLS MONSTER                      WITH      THE  
 AID OF WEAPON  
 WITH THE AID OF HERO<sub>2</sub>

According to Watkins, however, both auxiliaries are in complementary distribution and cannot appear simultaneously. Watkins' schema can only be useful to us in outline, since we cannot reconstruct the original Slavic phraseology underlying the oral narration; but the schema may provide some slight indication of the oral kernel existing in the myth collected by Kadłubek.

In addition, the theme of the trick by offering food, which in the narration is functionally the WEAPON, seems to be archaic in the legend by Vincent of Krakow when compared to other Indo-European traditions of which the author could not have been aware. This is the case of *Śatapathabrāhmaṇ* a 5.2.3.7, where Indra kills Vṛtra by the offer of a ritual cake, and the Hittite myth recited during the Purulli festival, in which the goddess Inara forces the Dragon to exit its den by offering it a banquet of food and drink (Beckmann 1985). It appears that the theme of the trick cannot be taken automatically to exclude the auxiliary hero: according to Oppian's *Halieutica* 3.15-20, Pan, as auxiliary hero of Zeus, offered Typhon a banquet of fish to force him out of his cave. This latest parallel has been highlighted by Bernabé (2004), who argues that the motif of the trick with food preserved by Oppian is crucial to determining the validity of oral transmission of the myth. Alternatively, following Banaszkiewicz's proposal (1993), the two heroes might be viewed as ancient elements of the myth similar in nature to the Dioscuri.

No obvious rhetorical end is apparent in the concatenation of these varied themes, in the simple and far from rhetorical narrative order of the elements in question, or in the myth's primary purpose, which is to justify the creation of a new social order that imposes civilization upon primeval disorder, chaos and cruelty.<sup>12</sup> This points toward the conclusion that the story rests upon an oral foundation myth of Indo-

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<sup>12</sup>This would have been in very marked contrast to the versions of the myth found in Greek, Anatolian, and Irish literatures, as pointed out by Watkins (1995: 300).

European tradition, in which the author has interwoven elements to be found in Virgil and Livy. Ovid is surprisingly less used, in view of this last author's reputation during the medieval period.

One additional aspect of Vincent's narrative, however, remains to be considered. As just noted, the myth has a clear aim — i.e., to justify the creation of a new city, Krakow. And in the story of the foundation itself, as told by the pious Vincent at the beginning of chapter I.7, there exists a parallel with other Indo-European traditions, in particular Greek and Celtic, of which he could not have been aware<sup>13</sup>. In order to justify the change of name from “Graccovia” (from Graccus) to “Krakow”, the author states that the new name had its origin in the croaking (Lat. *crocitatio*, Pol. *krakanie*) of the crows gathered around the corpse of the monster.<sup>14</sup>

In form, this is an etymological *aition* of the type favoured by the Stoics, such as Vincent might have found in various Latin authors. Two additional and crucial aspects of the foundation story, however, should not be overlooked. The first is that the foundation occurs as a consequence of a spontaneous (i.e., neither sought nor requested) oracle brought by the crows. The second is that the name of the city stems from this ornithomantic omen. Could Vincent have found inspiration for this combination in any Latin author he knew, in order to include this part of the myth? Certainly in Livy 1.7.1 an ornithomantic display is used to justify the supremacy of Romulus over Remus — but this omen neither indicates the place where the city is to be founded nor its name.

Crows intervene in other Greek stories of city foundation. A crow acts as guide in the foundation of Cyrene, as related at Callimachus, *Hymn* 2.65-68; the sacrifice of a crow is decisive in the foundation of Mallos, according to Callimachus *Frg.* 38, and in the foundation of Cardia, as we read in Stephanus of Byzantium, *Ethnika* s. v. Καρδία. A Delphic oracle in which white crows intervene gives rise to the foundations of Magnesia<sup>15</sup> and Korakes.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup>The victory of Bhīma over the monstrous Baka (*Mahābhārata* 1.152, ed. van Buitenen 1973:312-313) motivates the foundation of a Brahmin Feast.

<sup>14</sup>*Quam quidam a crocitate coruorum, qui eo ad cadaver monstri confluxerant, Cracouiam dixerunt.*

<sup>15</sup>Jacoby (1964:III B, frg. 482 F 3).

A further parallelism is exhibited in the story of the foundation of Lugdunum (present day Lyon) as told by Pseudo-Plutarch in *De fluviis* 6.4 — a text transmitted by Clitophon of which Vincent of Krakow could not have known by any means, and that clearly reflects a Gaulish foundation myth similarly supplied with a (false) etymologic explanation<sup>17</sup>:

παράκειται δ' αὐτῷ ὄρος Λούγδουνου  
καλούμενον•μετωνομάσθη δὲ δι' αἰτίαν τοιαύτην. Μώμορος  
καὶ Ἀτεπόμαρος ὑπὸ Σεσηρονέως τῆς ἀρχῆς ἐκβλεθέντες εἰς  
τοῦτου κατὰ προσταγὴν χρησμοῦ ἦλθον τὸν λόφον πόλιν  
κτίσαι θέλοντες• τῶν δὲ θεμελίων ὀρυσσομένων, αἰφνιδίως  
κόρακες ἐπιφανέντες καὶ διαπτερυξάμενοι τὰ πέριξ  
ἐπληρώσαν δένδρα. Μώμορος δὲ οἰνωσκοπίας ἔμπειρος  
ὑπάρχων τὴν πόλιν Λούγδουνου προσηγόρευσεν• λούον γὰρ  
τῇ σφῶ̄ διαλέκτῳ τὸν κ ὄρακα καλοῦσι.

Next to this (the Arar river) is the mountain called Lugdunum. It received its name for the following reason: Momoros and Atepomaros, dethroned and expelled by Seseronis, arrived there guided by an oracle with the intention of establishing a town upon the hill. After digging the foundations, a flock of crows suddenly appeared and, fluttering around them, filled the trees. Momoros, knowledgeable of ornithomancy, decided to call the city Lugdunum, since crow in his language was *lûgon*.

The parallels are striking. In Pseudo-Plutarch's narrative, two culture heroes arrive at the site of the city's foundation as a result of compulsory exile — although the relationship between Momoros and Atepomaros is not entirely clear (we do not know if they are brothers), and the reason for exile is antecedent to Lugdunum's foundation story, while in the myth of Krakow it is a consequence of the fratricide committed by Krak II — despite its presentation as a crucial element of the story. In addition, Momoros possesses druidic characteristics (Guyonvarc'h-Leroux 1986) absent in Krak, and which are realized instead in the rather different figure of Vanda-Libuše. In both tales, an omen is witnessed in the form of crows, in Celtic mythology a symbol of the god Lug (Krappe

<sup>16</sup>Jacoby (1964:III B frg. 327 F 7).

<sup>17</sup>Of course, the etymology of Lugdunum is from the theonym Lug.

1936). In the foundation of Lugdunum this omen is spontaneous, without any natural cause, while in Krakow's it is provided with a rational explanation: the crows have arrived to devour the corpse of the monster. In either event, however, the flock of crows is interpreted as auspicious, and is even used to change or inspire the name of the city.

The most significant difference between the two myths is the absence of any conflict with a monster — central to Vincent of Krakow's account — from that of Pseudo-Plutarch. As discussed above, however, the Holophagus tale is in large part analyzable in terms of an interaction between motifs taken from Classical culture and, to a greater extent, the oral tradition. By contrast, significant parallels are evident when comparing the foundation myths of Lugdunum and Krakow, and these parallels can be explained neither as coincidences nor as a result of Vincent of Krakow's knowledge of ancient sources.

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