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ANCIENT SICILY
IN THE EYES OF POLISH TRAVELLERS

The Poles who from the 16th century travelled to Italy more frequently mostly visited its northern cities: Venice, Padua, Bologna, Florence etc., and obviously Rome. They rarely ventured to Naples and only some reached Sicily. In many cases, since 1530, when members of the Knights of St. John settled in Malta (the Knights of Rhodes, since then of Malta) trips to both islands were combined. This journey was most commonly made by ship, sailing from Naples to Messina or Palermo, since a land route through wild Calabria was extremely strenuous.

As far as many descriptions of northern and middle Italian cities exist in old Polish literature, mentions of Trinakria – “Triangle” – what the ancient poetic name of the island was, are very rare. We only know who had reached Sicily, but how long he had stayed there or what he had seen remains an unknown matter.

In 1505 – 1506 a poet, diplomat and royal secretary, later to become the bishop of Warmia, Jan Dantyszek (1485 – 1548) arrived there returning from the Holy Land. His journey was described by a Silesian poet, Kasper Ursinus Velius:

*...Denique Trinacriam fumantemque ignibus Aetnam
Conspicies, Siculo praeteriture freto...¹*

In 1520 (during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land) or in 1528 (during the French campaign to Naples) Sicily was visited by Stanisław Łaski (1491 –

¹ *Genethiacon Joannis Dantisci* [jn:] Gasparis Ursini Veliii e Germanis Silesii, *Poematum libri quinque*, Basileae 1522, k. L2^b. Kasper Ursinus Velius (in reality Kasper Vel) was a Silesian poet brought up in Cracow, who wrote about Poland and became a tutor for the future emperor Maximilian II.

1550), a warrior – condotierre who later became the voivode of Sieradz, an educated political writer and translator of the works of Erasmus of Rotterdam. The news of his journey were written by Stanisław Warszewicki² in a leaflet *Oratio de Stanislao a Lasky, palatino Siradensi, Wittenbergae* 1551: ...*Quo in cursu Cretam et Siciliam praecipuas maris mediterranei et multis causis celebratas insulas contemplatus est*³.

An important and interesting literary record is a short text (only a part is preserved), *An Anonym's Diary of an Italian, Spanish and Portuguese Journey*⁴, the author of which was on a journey to southern Italy, Sicily, Malta and later to Spain (from Barcelona through Madrid to Seville) and France in 1595. The „Diary” ends at the stay in Lisbon, from where the traveller was to journey to Santiago de Compostella, and later to France. We may conclude from the text that he had previously visited Hungary, Germany, France and the Netherlands and had stayed in Rome for a longer period of time. He was a well educated man who was an expert on Latin literature and fluent in languages, but at the same time naive in a medieval way (admiring wonderful relics, such as „a tiny sheet of the Lord Jesus diapers made by the Holy Lady herself”, which he saw in Lerida, p. 75). He was not a man of the cloth, nor a scholar, but a middle aged man, very strong and resilient, which is proved by fragments describing his long, solitary walks (among others he walked the entire east coast of Sicily), who could make ends meet with just pennies without having to beg. His courage is also proved by the fact that although he had survived a dangerous storm while sailing to Malta, he was not afraid of further sea voyage. He eagerly told jokes and proverbs and at the same time was ready to often use his sword (when his old was lost, he bought a new one with the last money). The „Diary” differs from the above mentioned short notes as it very precisely describes the route of the journey and the visited places and the author frequently quotes ancient authors describing them.

„*Anno 1595 die tertia Martii* we left Naples by sea...” are the first words of the preserved text. The author journeyed south by both sea and land and the places he passed reminded him of historic events. He finally reached Scylla and Charibdis, or the Strait of Messina and on the 13th of March he arrived

² Stanisław Warszewicki (c. 1530 – 1591) – a Jesuit writer and counter-reformation activist, translator and an authority on the Greek language. He was one of the most prominent Polish Jesuits and the translator of Heliodorus (*Aethiopicae historiae libri*, Basel 1552).

³ After H. Barycz, *Spojrzenie w przeszłość polsko-włoską*, Wrocław-Warsaw-Cracow 1965, p. 89.

⁴ *Anonima diarjusz peregrynacji włoskiej, hiszpańskiej, portugalskiej (1595)*, edited by Jan Czubek [Archiwum do dziejów literatury i oświaty w Polsce PAU XVI] Cracow 1925. The great scholar added a short introduction and short notes as well as a translation of all the Latin phrases.

in Messina, writing that in the ancient times the city was known as Zankle, later Mamertina, Messana. On the 14th of March he crossed Taormina, noting its theatre (changed into an amphitheatre in late antiquity) and admiring the views. In turn, on the 16th of March he journeyed to Catania and later through „Augusta known as Hybla [...] and later Megara, which had been destroyed by Marcellus and Pompey after him, while Augustus rebuilt it and it was named after him...”⁵, and on the night of the same day he finally reached Syracuse. He recalled the strength of the city and its famous rulers, and obviously Archimedes. He writes about five districts of the city: the oldest Ortygia, Achradina, Tyche, Neapolis and Epipolai, „all those empty, with only ruins standing among vineyards... Where *Hexapylum Livio* had once been, now a grave with stone rumble... what had been called Neapolis now is called after the ruins *li Muragli*. There is also a *teatrum*, all *antiquitas*, and *amphiteatrum ovale* is now called Collizeo. There are also those Lautumiae (of which Cicero)⁶ underground structures; grotta di S. Nicolo, grotta Favella, where each letter is echoed...”. He also writes of catacombs, comparing them to the Roman ones of St. Sebastian. „The city has two ports and a great one, where *fons Arethusa* is, by Ovid (Metam., V, 576): *quae tibi causa fugae, cur sis, Arethusa, sacer fons* and the river Alpheus joins it there, and a second Alpheus, which springs from the earth in the sea, as if pumped, to the top, which was a subject of numerous poetic fairy tales”⁷.

⁵ Megara Hyblaia – a city on the east coast of Sicily founded in 750 (728?) by colonists from Megara, destroyed by Gelon in 483 with the inhabitants transferred to Syracuse. The city was finally destroyed by Marcellus during the II Punic war. Augusta – a city founded on an island by emperor Frederick II in 1232 in some distance from Megara Hyblaia.

⁶ *Livius' Heksapylon* – that „six-gated” (a gate of six passages?) passage in the walls of Syracuse, leading from the city to the north along the coast. It was mentioned by Titus Livius (XXIV, 21; XXV, 24). In Neapolis there is a Greek theatre built in the 5th century and rebuilt in the 3rd century and during the Roman period. The present structure dates to the times of Hieron II and is semicircular with a diameter of 134 m. Near is an amphitheatre of Augustus built at the beginning of the 1st century A.D. The name Collizeo (Colisseo), obviously deriving from the Roman Coliseum is even today often used to describe an amphitheatre. Latomia, Latin Lautumiae – quarry (from Greek lithos – stone and temnos – cut); Cicero, *In Verrem*, V, 143: „*Carcer ille qui est a crudelissimo tyranno Dionysio factus Syracusis, quae lautumiae vocantur, in istius imperio domicilium civium Romanorum fuit*”. Athenian prisoners (7000) were kept in terrible conditions in those artificial caverns after they were captured by the Syracuse during the famous tragic Athenian war expedition in 415-413.

⁷ Basilica S. Nicolo built in the 11th century on the ruins of an ancient cistern, which was initially a quarry. “Favella” may be translated as “ringing” because of excellent acoustics. It refers to a cavern 65 m long and 25 m high. In 1608 the famous painter Caravaggio, having escaped from Malta, visited the cavern and nicknamed it “Orecchio di Dionisio”, since it was said that that Syracusan tyrant was able to overhear prisoners he kept there due to the cavern’s

From Syracuse the author walked on foot as far as *promontorium Pachyni*⁸, quoting fragments of the Aeneid (III, 698ff), where the poet mentions the rivers and cities: Helorus, Camarina „of which only one tower remains, here from this Camarina the *adagium* arose: *Camarinam movere*⁹, Gela „also a famous city named after a river¹⁰, Akragas „a mountain and a city on it, now called Agrigentum, *vulgus* Girgenti the famous *tyrannide Phalaridis*”¹¹.

On the 20th of March the author sailed to Malta, but in just a few days he reached „Trapani, which has been a famous city and port for a long time, known as Drepanum, [Aen.III,705]. It is situated at the foot of the mountain Eryce¹², from the *promontorium Lilybaei* 18 Italian miles *in circa*”.

On the 31st of March he ventured to Palermo, and on the 2nd of April he sailed to Trapani, from where he returned to Malta, which he reached on the 8th of April. On the 8th of May the Grand Master of Knights of Malta died and the author of the „Diary” was witness to the election of a new Grand Master, giving an interesting description of the ceremony. On the 27th of May he left Malta and returned to Sicily. He rode through Modika and reached Lentini: „A city called *Leontium* by Ptolemy and Plinius, was very grand and built, which

incredible characteristics. A sweet water spring called Occhio della Zillica is even now active in the Syracusan port.

⁸ Today cape Capo Passero near the town of Pachino, the south most part of Sicily. The two others that have given the island its name, *Trinacria* are Pelorus and Lilybaeum.

⁹ The city Helorus was founded by Syracuse c. 600 B.C., and the city of Kamarina in 600-599 B.C. It had been repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt before its definite end by the hands of the Romans in 258 during the First Punic War. The proverb “to move Kamarina” derives from a story, that an oracle forbid the inhabitants to dry a swamp bringing sickness to the city, but also protecting it from its enemies. The people disobeyed, giving the Carthaginians access to Kamarina, which resulted in the city being sacked. „*Camarinam movere*” therefore means to provoke trouble, which was referred to in the quoted fragment from the Aeneid.

¹⁰ Gela – a Greek town on the southern coast of Sicily, on the river Gelas. According to Thucydides it was founded in 689 by oikistos from Rhodes and Crete. The time of highest prosperity for the city was the rule of tyrants Hippocrates (498 – 491) and Gelon in the beginning of the 5th century. It was where Aeschylus died. The final end of the city was brought by Fintias in 282 B.C.

¹¹ Akragas, Agrigentum (until 1927 called Girgenti), on the southern Sicilian coast, founded c.a. 581 by colonists from Gela. It was a home town of the philosopher and politician Empedocles and an important art centre under the rule of tyrants before being destroyed by Carthage in 406 B.C. In late antiquity its inhabitants took refuge in the safety of hilltops, founding the city of Grigenti. Akragas has ruins of a number of Greek temples, which were also visible in the 16th century. Phalaris was a tyrant famous for his cruelty, among others for torturing people in a brazen bull hanging above fire.

¹² Trapani (Lat. Drepanum) a city and port of the Elymoi people living on Eryks, to the west of Palermo. Eryce (lat. Eryx; it. Erice) – a city on the west coast of Sicily, a Punic colony and an important centre of the cult of Venus (Venus Ericina).

was seen in great ruins and city walls; Gorgias came from here, that old philosopher, the master of Socrates, who, having lived for 107 years and studied endlessly, when he was asked if such long life didn't bore him, answered: *Nihil est, quod incusem senectutem*¹³. From there on the 30th of May he journeyed to Katania, arriving to Taormina on the 31st of May and to Messina on the 1st of June. From there he travelled to Naples by land and sea. He reached the city on the 11th of June and later sailed to the north, along the west coast of Italy (also according to his remarks on local *antiquitates*), to reach Nice on the 29th of July and leave Italian land.

The „Diary”, giving such short pieces of information, is however unique among Polish literature regarding Sicily. In 1640 Sicily and Malta were visited by the poet Jan Andrzej Morsztyn (1621 – 1693) with his nephew Stanisław¹⁴, but we had to wait as long as the 2nd half of the 18th century for new, more detailed descriptions¹⁵.

In the 1st half of the 19th century two famous Polish poets visited the island, however the visits were short and did not influence their works. In 1830 Sicily was shortly visited by Adam Mickiewicz, who arrived from Naples, and nine years later Zygmunt Krasiński with Kazimierz and Jerzy Lubomirski were on the island (for six days). In a text meant for Delfina Potocka he melancholically mentions Messina and Palermo¹⁶.

In August 1845 Sicily was visited by Michał Wiszniewski (1794–1865) – a philosopher, psychologist, literature historian (professor of the Jagiellonian University since 1831). During a sea journey from Naples he was witness to

¹³Lentini (Gr. Leontinoi; Lat. Leontini, ob. Lantini) – a city in the eastern part of Sicily founded in 730-729 by the Greeks of Naxos. After a period of prosperity in the 2nd half of the 4th century it fell in Roman hands in 241. It was the birthplace of the famous Gorgias (480 – 375). The phrase was quoted after Cicero (*De Senectute*, 13).

¹⁴They travelled the whole Christian Mediterranean world, which is mentioned in a poem by Jan Andrzej for Stanisław, reminding various types of local French, Spanish and Italian wines (the poem is the first mention of coffee in Polish literature, of which the poet speaks with disgust).

¹⁵The travellers from the 18th century who visited Sicily were described by Tomasz Mikocki *A la recherche de l'art antique. Les voyageurs polonais en Italie dans les années 1750 – 1830*, Wrocław 1988, p. 108 – 111, therefore I am only going to name them without further detail; Stanisław Kostka Potocki (1775), Jan Michał Borch (1776) – Syracuse, Agrigento, Segesta; Jan Chrystian Kamsetzer (1781) – Segesta, Selinunte, Agrigento and Syracuse; bishop Jan Nepomucen Kossakowski (1782), Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz (1784) – Palermo, Eryx, Selinunte, Agrigento, Alicant (Licata) former Gela, Katania, Syracuse, Taormina; Stanisław Poniatowski (1785) – Agrigento, Syracuse; Franciszek Bieliński (1791) – Agrigento.

¹⁶*Dziennik sycylijski* (1839) in: Z. Krasiński, *Dzieła literackie*, vol. III, Warsaw 1973, p. 94 – 116. Both poets in love with their muses write similarly, that it would have been paradise if the loved ones were there.

the emerging of a new volcanic island to the north of Sicily. He visited Palermo (including the Museum), Segesta (description of a theatre and temple), Catania, where he saw objects from Camarina, Syracuse, Taormina (description of a theatre) and he climbed Etna, providing us with in depth descriptions of the landmarks, flora and the buildings he saw¹⁷.

In December 1848 a Polish general, writer and poet, a political and national activist as well as a military historian Ludwik Adam Mierosławski (1814 – 1878) arrived in Palermo and became the head of military staff of the army of the revolutionary Sicilian government. After the fall of the insurrection in April 1849 he returned to Paris. In December 1860 Giuseppe Garibaldi appointed him the commander of the International Legion in Naples, however it had not been finally formed. There were many Poles among the famous Garibaldi's Thousand of Red Shirts landing in Sicily in May 1860, however for obvious reasons they were far from visiting antique cities.

Among the Poles visiting Sicily in the 20th century, when reaching the island was far more easy, we must mention one of the most famous Polish composers, Karol Szymanowski (1882 – 1937) and his cousin and friend, famous writer Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz (1894 – 1980), who was given the *honoris causa* title by the Warsaw University in 1971 and by the Jagiellonian University in 1979.

The first of them has repeatedly visited Sicily from the time he was first there in 1911. The Syracusan spring of Arethusa inspired him in 1915 to compose a piece for violin and piano by that title (formerly called „La source enchantée”), which together with „Narcissus” and „The Dryads and Pan” is a part of the cycles „Myths op. 30”. The first part was first played on the 5th of April, 1915 in Kiev, and the entire composition – on the 10th of May, 1916 in Uman. Naturally we need to mention the world-famous opera by Szymanowski, „King Roger”, the libretto for which was written by Iwaszkiewicz, composed during the years 1918 – 1924, which takes place in Sicily in the 12th century. He was also fascinated by metopes from the E temple in Selinunte, which he saw in 1911 in the Palermo museum. During the spring and summer of 1915 (when he was working on the „Myths”), he composed three piano poems op. 29, titled „The Metopes”.

Szymanowski, enchanted with Sicily, passed this fascination to a year younger Iwaszkiewicz, who has visited the island 13 times. The result of those visits are numerous literary works (among others *Sicilian Sonnets* – among them *The Spring of Arethusa*), *Italian Novels* and two books¹⁸. It is worth to

¹⁷ M. Wiszniewski, *Podróż do Włoch, Sycylii i Malty*, Warsaw 1982, p. 317 – 362.

¹⁸ J. Iwaszkiewicz, *Książka o Sycylii*, Warsaw 1956; *Podróże do Włoch*, Warsaw 1977.

mention that it was in Syracuse (which, strangely, he has visited just once) where the author has finished a famous, and completely unrelated to the island, story „*The Maids of Wilko*”, on the basis of which Andrzej Wajda made a movie in 1979.

In 1968 Sicily was visited by a pair of famous art historians and writers – Ela and Andrzej Banach, which resulted in a very discerning and yet poetic book about the island¹⁹.

A typical route of the past, infrequent tourists was by ship (alternately by train in the 20th century) from Naples to Messina or Palermo (including Monreale) and later visiting Taormina, Syracuse, Agrigento, Selinunte and Segesta. To that we may add a Norman cathedral in Cefalú and visiting the foot of Etna. Today, in the time of mass tourism, Sicily is visited by thousands of Poles, and although most of them mainly remain on the beaches, a lot also visits numerous ruins of ancient cities (now also the Roman *Villa Casale* near Piazza Armerina) spread on the island that is a bridge between Africa and Europe. But so far no new literary impressions inspired by the Greek and Roman ruins and works of art were created, and Sicily in the imagination of a typical Pole is rather associated with the Mafia than with Syracuse or Selinunte, Empedocles and Archimedes, Roger I and II or emperor Frederick II buried in the Palermo cathedral.

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¹⁹E. and A. Banach, *Podróż na Sycylię czyli koniec świata*, vol. I-II, Cracow 1971.

