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SLAVIC RUNES IN THE RESEARCH OF POLISH SCHOLARS IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Abstract

The article analyses 19th century research on the possible connections between early Slavic writings and runes. These theories were vivid and discussed in the 19th century, but for the most part rejected at the end of the century with the development of critical historiography, historical methods and philology (Estreicher, Małecki, Bruckner).

Key words: Slavic runes, Polish historiography, 19th century.

Słowa kluczowe: słowiańskie runy, historiografia polska, XIX wiek.

The last decades of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century saw the birth of national history, of Slavic, German and Celtic antiquity. Previously, this term was associated exclusively with the Greco-Roman times and the great Eastern civilisations. Now Slavic studies emerged, and corresponded with the re-evaluation of the Middle Ages and the pre-medieval, barbaric past of the Slavs. The goal of the Slavic studies was to reach to this ancient time and discover the *Geist* of the nation, which was often depicted in opposition to Greco-Roman culture.¹

Scholars in Slavic countries shared a fascination with an idealised Slavonic Arcadia, destroyed by Christianity and its foreign culture. The Slovaks Pavel Jozef Šafárik and Ján Kollár were the ideologists of the Pan-Slavic movement

¹ This idea was expressed by W. Surowiecki, "O sposobach dopełnienia historii i znajomości Słowian", *Roczniki Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk Warszawskiego*, vol. VIII (1812), pp. 82–119. See: J. Maślanka, *Słowiańskie mity historyczne w literaturze polskiego Oświecenia*, Wrocław 1968, pp. 100–127; G.G. Iggers, *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft. Eine kritik der traditionellen Geschichtsauffassung von Herder bis zum Gegenwart*, Munich 1971, pp. 50–51.

and prominent Slavists in their time. Stanisław Staszic, Hugo Kołłątaj and Zorian Dołęga-Chodakowski of Poland shared their belief that Slavs were the most ancient European nation, living in central, eastern and southern Europe before the migration of other tribes (Greeks, Romans, Germans). Šafárik identified the *Sclaveni* and *Antes* of early medieval sources (especially Jordanes) with the *Weneti* from Roman sources, while others argued for the Slavic origins of the Etruscans.² In 1818, Zorian Chodakowski, a pioneer of Slavonic ethnography, depicted two cultures from the Slavic past in his article *On the Slavs before Christianity*³ – the original Slavonic one, preserved by the peasants, and the imported foreign culture of the nobility. He was the first Polish writer to view Christianity as a negative influence on the Slavic culture.

The famous historian and politician Joachim Lelewel believed that Slavs were an active force in history, with their original culture, their love for freedom and the well-developed and organised self-government. Lelewel, who also studied Scandinavian pagan culture (he was the author of the first Polish translation of *Edda*), firmly believed in the superiority of the Slavic culture over that of the Scandinavian barbarians. Lelewel's writings influenced Polish historiography in the 19th century for several decades.⁴

Surowiecki, Chodakowski, Šafárik, Lelewel and other scholars of this period (like Waclaw Maciejowski or the Czech Slavist Josef Dobrovsky) shared the belief that the pagan Slavs had their own writing system. All ancient civilisations knew letters, so why should the Slavs be the only exception? In 1822, Wawrzyniec Surowiecki of the Warsaw Society of Friends of Learning gave a public lecture about the runic characters of the ancient barbarians.⁵ Following Herodotus, he claimed that the knowledge of writing was common among the barbarians – Slavs, Germans, Goths and Baltic tribes – long before Greek or Roman alphabet had been invented. This first alphabet of the barbarians came directly from the Phoenician one and it was only after the Roman conquest and Christianisation that it was replaced by Latin or Glagolic writing – every-

² Šafárik's most influential work was *Slovanské starožitnosti* Prague 1836–1865. Staszic wrote about the autochthonic origin of Slavs in *O ziemiorództwie Karpatów i innych gór i równin Polski*, Warszawa 1815.

³ Z.D. Chodakowski, *O Sławiańszczyźnie przed chrześcijaństwem oraz inne pisma i listy*, compiled by J. Maślanka, Warszawa 1967.

⁴ J. Lelewel, *Kultura Waregów i Słowian* (Poznań, 1826); *idem*, *Cześć bałwochwalcza Słowian i Polski*, Poznań 1857. Regarding Lelewel's views on Slavic pre-Christian history, see the latest work by H.M. Słoczyński, *Światło w dziejarskiej ciemnicy. Koncepcja dziejów i interpretacja przeszłości Polski Joachima Lelewela*, Kraków 2010.

⁵ W. Surowiecki, *O charakterach pisma runicznego u dawnych barbarzyńców europejskich z domniemaniem o stanie ich oświecenia. Rzecz czytana na posiedzeniu publicznym Towarzystwa dnia 30 kwietnia 1822 roku*, [in:] W. Surowiecki, *Dziela*, ed. K.J. Turowski, Kraków 1861, 520–561. Regarding the interest in runes in 19th century Poland, see K.M. Kowalski, "The fascination with Runes in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Poland", [in:] *Roman, Runes and Ogham*, ed. J. Higgitt, K. Forsyth, D. Parsons, Donnington 2001, pp. 134–147.

where save in Scandinavia, where it was still in use in historical times.⁶ According to this theory, the Nordic runes and the Slavic alphabet originated from the same source, the Phoenician alphabet. It was obvious for Surowiecki that the Slavs also used runic characters.

Forty years later, the writer and scholar Józef Ignacy Kraszewski completed the Phoenician theory with a date. He claimed that the Phoenicians brought their alphabet to the Slavs, Germanic tribes and Scandinavians before the year 201 BCE; that is, before the end of the Second Punic War, because contacts between the Phoenicians and the Baltic region were broken after this conflict.⁷

The theory about a common – Phoenician or generally Asian – source of Nordic and Slavic runes became widely accepted. Jacob Grimm, one of the founding fathers of Germanic philology, discovered in Glagolitic writings and in Wulfila's Gothic Bible several runic characters that were supposed to have originated from this first alphabet.⁸

Other scholars argued for the Etruscan theory. It stated that the alphabet came from Asia to the Slavs and/or Etruscans, who were believed to be of Slavic origin due to the fact that, in the words of Dionissios of Halicarnassus, was unlike any other. Among the supporters of the Etruscan idea were Šafárik and Jan Kollar, and the Polish academics Jędrzej Kucharski and Tadeusz Wolański. Jędrzej Kucharski was convinced that he found evidence that proved both the existence of Slavic runes and their Etruscan origin. In 1811, 26 bronze Etruscan helmets were discovered near Negau in Styria (now in Slovenia). Two of them bore inscriptions in northern Etruscan alphabet.⁹ Professor Kucharski assumed the writings were in Slavonic and his reading of one of the inscriptions was: *Oh mason, here lies Jaromysl, lord of the župa*. Kucharski's interpretation of the Nogau inscriptions (1829) was popularised by Michał Wiszniewski, the author of a comprehensive history of Polish literature.¹⁰

According to Kucharski, the alphabet came to the Slavic Etruscans directly from some unknown Asian source and the Slavs then introduced it to Scandinavians and other Germanic people. In other words, the *futhark* were derived from the Slavic runes. Scholars tried to prove this theory with help of the comparative mythology. The Vanir of Nordic mythology was identified as the Slavic Wenedi. The Slavic goddess Prija became Freya, and Żywa (a Slavonic Ceres) was identified with Sif, or Sib.¹¹ Odin was believed to be the Slavic name Jeden (the

⁶ W. Surowiecki, *op. cit.*, p. 560.

⁷ J.I. Kraszewski, *Sztuka u Słowian*, „Biblioteka Warszawska”, z. CXII (1850), pp. 255–260.

⁸ J. Grimm, *Geschichte der Deutschen Sprache*, Bd I, Leipzig 1853, pp. 100–110.

⁹ See T. Markey, “A Tale of Two Helmets: The Negau A and B Inscriptions”, *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 29 (2001), pp. 69–172.

¹⁰ M. Wiszniewski, *Historia literatury polskiej*, vol., I Kraków 1840, p. 161. Other readings of the inscription were given by Jan Kollar, who also believed them to be Slavonic.

¹¹ W. Surowiecki, *Śledzenie początków narodów słowiańskich*, Warsaw, 1824, pp. 137–138.

One or Unity) and his cognomen Runhofdi derived from the Slavonic Rungław, identified with the Slavic deity Tryglaw.¹² In the light of comparative mythology, the Slavic origin of the Scandinavian religion and *futhark* was supposed to be proven beyond all doubt.

Those ideas, however, were based mostly on linguistic, etymological and theoretical speculations. Academics, although firmly believing in the existence of Slavic runes, still awaited still confirmation from written or archaeological sources. Both were extremely scarce. The written sources could, in fact, be reduced to two accounts. One of them was a sentence in *An Account of Letters*, written by the Bulgarian monk Hrabar in the 9th century: “The Slavs had no books, but they read and communicated by means of strokes and incisions.”¹³ The words *strokes and incisions* suggested, in opinion of scholars, the use of runes. The second information was found in Thietmar’s chronicle. Thietmar wrote that the idols in the Redarian temple in Retra had their names carved on them.¹⁴ The archaeological evidence was also very weak. Besides the Negau helmets, scholars could only count on the famous – or rather infamous – Prillwitz idols.

Approximately sixty small bronze sculptures of Slavic gods and other artefacts bearing runic inscriptions were found by Gideon Sponholz (a local goldsmith) in Prillwitz on Lake Tollense in Mecklenburg in the late 17th century. Drawings of the idols and the inscriptions were published in 1771 by Daniel Woge and Andreas Gottlieb Masch. Masch was convinced that the figurines came from the pagan stronghold in Retra, which might have been located near Lake Tollense, and that the inscriptions were made in the Slavic runes used by Redarians from Retra.¹⁵ Between 1771 and 1794, about a hundred similar figurines were discovered. The second part of the drawings was published by Jan Potocki.¹⁶

The Prillwitz idols became a scientific sensation, but suspicions arose almost immediately. Some scholars pointed out that the names of the gods had Latinised forms known from medieval chronicles. The shape and stylistics of the

¹² J.I. Kraszewski, *op. cit.*, pp. 270–279.

¹³ *чръты и рѣзы* – strokes (tallies) and incisions. See R. J. Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 16–17.

¹⁴ *Thietmari Merseburgensis episcopi Chronicon*, MGH, LV, Hrsg. von R. Holtzmann, Berlin 1935, VI 23.

¹⁵ A.G. Masch, D. Woge, *Die gottesdienstlichen Alterthümer der Obotriten aus dem Tempel zu Rhetra am Tollenser-See*, Berlin 1771. Regarding the history of the idols see: A. Linnebach, *In den „Sümpfen der Hypothesen“ – Wissensvermittlung auf Irrwegen: die Prillwitzer Idole und die landesarchäologische Forschung in der Aufklärungszeit*, [in:] *Buchkultur und Wissensvermittlung in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, Hrsg. v. A. Gardt, M. Schnyder, J. Wolf, Berlin/Boston 2011, pp. 293–310. On the Rethra: L. Dralle, *Rethra. Zu Bedeutung und Lage des redarischen Kultortes*, “Jahrbuch für die Geschichte Mittel- und ostdeutschlands” 33 (1984), pp. 37–61.

¹⁶ J. Potocki, *Voyage dans quelques partie de la Basse Saxe*, Hamburg 1795.

idols were rather strange, too. The inquiry held by Prussian authorities in 1835 confirmed that the sculptures were a forgery, manufactured by Sponholz family.¹⁷ However, most the Polish scholars of the time believed that the forgery allegation only concerned the second part of the idols – those published by Potocki. Kucharski, Surowiecki and Lelewel argued for the authenticity of the rest of the Prillwitz idols. Although Lelewel expressed some doubts concerning the idol of Prowe, the Slavic god of law, who – according to Helmold’s chronicle – was never depicted in human form, he nevertheless believed the runes used on the sculptures to be authentic.¹⁸

In 1835, Jan Kollar, a Slovak poet, Slavonicist and archaeologist from Vienna, discovered a runic inscription on one of two stone sculptures (probably lions), situated by the entrance of Bamberg cathedral. He read it as *Carni bu* – Czarnibog, the Black (Evil) God. According to local legend, the stones were brought to Bamberg from Slavic Pomerania by Otto of Bamberg in the 12th century. Pawel Safarik and several Polish scholars after him announced the inscription to be authentic, but its Slavic origin unsure. There were doubts expressed by Lelewel for example, as to whether a god like Czarnibog that opposed Belbog, the Good/Big God, ever existed in Slavic mythology.¹⁹ In the 1850s, Wojciech Cybulski, a professor of Slavonic literature in Wrocław, journeyed to Bamberg to have a look at the inscription and found it non-existent! What Kollar thought to be runes were natural cracks and crevices on the stone.²⁰

Despite such setbacks for Slavic runology, the existence of Slavic runes was generally accepted. The scholars and their learned audience awaited the definitive piece of evidence that would remove the doubts and questions around the Slavic writing system. In 1855, it seemed that their expectations would be satisfied. Piotr Droszewski, a landowner from Wielkopolska, discovered two stones with drawings and inscriptions in his uncle’s garden in Mikorzyn.²¹

The members of Society of Friends of Learning in Poznań greeted the discovery with enthusiasm. The inscriptions could be read with help of rhw Prillwitz

¹⁷ The results of the inquiry were published and commented on by J. A.K. Levezow, “Über die Ächtheit der sogenannten Obotritischen Runendenkmäler zu Neu-Strelitz. (Gelesen in der Akademie der Wissenschaften am 23. Januar und 24. Julius 1834.)”, [in:] *Abhandlungen der historisch-philosophischen Klasse der Königlich Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin. Aus dem Jahre 1834*, Berlin 1836, pp. 143–206.

¹⁸ J. Lelewel, *Cześć bałwochwaleza...*; Helmold, *Chronica Slavorum*, MGH, *Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum*, XXXII, ed. B. Schmeidler, Berlin 1937, p. I 69.

¹⁹ Lelewel denied the existence of dualism in Slavic mythology, believing firmly in monotheism of pagan Slavs; see J. Lelewel, *op. cit.*, pp. 372–375. The name of the deity, Zcerneboch (Czarnibog), appears in Helmold’s chronicle. Contemporary historians agree with Lelewel, that it was Helmold’s mistake or misunderstanding of Slavic beliefs. See Helmold, *op.cit.*, I 52; S. Urbańczyk, *Dawni Słowianie. Wiara i kult*, Wrocław 1991, p. 26.

²⁰ W. Cybulski, “Obecny stan nauki o runach słowiańskich”, *Roczniki Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk Poznańskiego*, vol. 1 (1860), pp. 26–30.

²¹ The discovery was described by W. Cybulski in *Obecny stan nauki...*, pp. 38–64.

runes, so they confirmed the authenticity of the Prillwitz idols. The human figure on one of the Mikorzyn stones was identified as Prowe. One of the scholars wrote to Lelewel, “You are the traitor of the Slavic case and supporter of the Germans. You doubted that Prowe could had been depicted in a human form and here you have your proof!”²² Lelewel answered apologetically. He voiced no doubts anymore, but insisted that the drawing represented not *Prowe* himself, but the people, the personification of law. According to Lelewel the inscription said “zbir k’bel Prowe,” the assembly in honour of the great Prowe. The inscription on the second Mikorzyn stone read “zbir woin, Boh dan sl na woi” – to the warriors’ assembly, God, give us strength in war.²³

Wojciech Cybulski, who wrote his paper on Slavic runes²⁴ in 1860, agreed with Lelewel that both the Mikorzyn stones and the first (older) part of Prillwitz idols were authentic. Using the Mikorzyn and Prillwitz inscriptions, he reconstructed the Slavic runic alphabet. He observed that while voiced and unvoiced consonants merged into one rune in Nordic alphabet, they were represented by separate characters in Slavonic runes. Furthermore, the Slavs had a character for the Slavonic sound *z / c / cz*. He concluded that Slavic and Nordic runes didn’t originate from one another, but came from the older, unknown Eastern alphabet. Cybulski gave his own interpretation of the Mikorzyn inscriptions. He believed that the stones commemorated two people: a warlord called Bogdan and a Prowe priest whose name, he argued, was Mike, and thus the inspiration for the place name Mikorzyn.²⁵ It was very clever indeed, because Helmold claimed that the name of Prowe’s high priest was Mike.²⁶

The 1860s were a period of perhaps the greatest triumph of Polish Slavic runology. Even the otherwise very sceptical Józef Szujski stated in 1862, “The Slavs had their own runic alphabet.”²⁷ Ten years later, a new generation of historians, linguists and archaeologists began to undermine the authority of their older colleagues. The positivist school of academics constructed a new conception of the origins of Slavic nations and their culture. Szujski, Bobrowski or Małecki abandoned the idea of the pagan Slavic Eden. Where Lelewel saw peaceful, well-governed people, Szujski discovered a pagan anarchy and barbarism that ended for the Slavs with the arrival of Christianity and Latin culture.

In 1872, Antoni Małecki, a professor of Polish literature in Kraków and Lwów, wrote on Slavic runes, “there is not even one piece of evidence that our pagan ancestors could write.” He said that the helmets from Negau were Etruscan, the Prillwitz idols an exceptionally crude forgery and that the Mikor-

²² Cited by W. Cybulski, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

²³ J. Lelewel, *op. cit.*, pp. 77–78.

²⁴ W. Cybulski, *op. cit.*

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 50–63.

²⁶ Helmold, *op. cit.*, I p. 69.

²⁷ J. Szujski, *Dzieje Polski według ostatnich badań*, vol. I, Lwów 1862, p. 43.

zyn stones were fakes too – the human figure on the first stone was modelled on drawings from Lelewel's work on Prillwitz, the runes came from the same source and the horse figure on the second stone looked very much like the horse depicted on the statue of Świętowit from Zbrucz.²⁸ Karol Estreicher, Zygmunt Gloger and later Aleksander Bruckner voiced the same opinion. Still, the Mikorzyn stones created discord in the academic world for the next 50 years. Some scholars like Kazimierz Szulc or Franciszek Piekosiński²⁹ weren't convinced they were forgeries.

The last attempt to revive the dying Slavic runology was made by Jan Leciejewski, a Slavist from the University of Lwów, in 1905. In his book *Slavic Runes and Runic Monuments*,³⁰ he discussed once more all of the available written and archaeological sources. Once again, he tried to read the Prillwitz and Mikorzyn inscriptions, as well as many other artefacts such as the early Polish coins of Mieszko and Sיעiech. His conclusion was that Poland was the homeland of the runic alphabet from which Nordic futhark originated. According to him, Slavic runes were used in the chancellery of Mieszko and his ancestors before the Latin alphabet replaced them in the 11th century. The knowledge of the alphabet supposed to be widespread and common, not restricted to the highest elites of the early Polish state. Leciejewski's book was reviewed by Aleksander Bruckner, who completely shattered his opponent's opinions.³¹ He repeatedly stressed there was no proof for the existence of Slavic runes and all of the evidence gathered in Leciejewski's work was based on forgeries or doubtful sources. His ironic remarks basically ended the dispute.

The development of Polish research on Slavic runes at the beginning of the 19th century was associated not only with the pre-scientific approach of the sources, but also with political ideas and the desire to create a great pre-history for the Polish nation, justifying his right to liberty and to their own state. The birth of modern historiography put an end to Polish runology, but to its failure also contributed the new political ideas expressed in the conciliatory attitudes towards the partitioning powers of Polish scholars of the late 19th century. Furthermore, the positivistic critical – sometimes even supercritical – approach to historical and archaeological sources resulted not only in the well-deserved death of Polish-Slavic runology, but in the long stagnation in some other spheres of

²⁸ A. Małecki, "Co rozumieć o runach słowiańskich i o autentyczności napisów na mikozyńskich kamieniach", *Roczniki Towarzystwa Przyjaciół nauk Poznańskiego* 7(1872), pp. 226–246. Małecki wrote that if Slavic runes existed, which was doubtful, they were borrowings from Scandinavia.

²⁹ K. Szulc, "Autentyczność kamieni mikozyńskich zbadana na miejscu...", *Roczniki Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk Poznańskiego*, 9 (1976), pp. 71–222; F. Piekosiński, *Kamienie mikozyńskie*, Kraków 1896. Piekosiński stated that a forgery was improbable.

³⁰ J. Leciejewski, *Runy i runiczne pomniki słowiańskie*, Lwów 1906.

³¹ A. Brückner, "Recenzja z 'Jan Leciejewski: Runy i runiczne pomniki słowiańskie'", *Kwartalnik Historyczny* 20, 1906, pp. 685–690.

Slavic studies as well, e.g. in studies on Slavic religion and mythology, which has only relatively recently begun to re-awaken the interest of Polish historians.

Anna Waśko

SŁOWIAŃSKIE RUNY W BADANIACH POLSKICH NAUKOWCÓW W XIX WIEKU

Streszczenie

Badania nad runami i – szerzej – nad hipotetycznym pismem prasłowiańskim i jego pochodzeniem prowadzone przez uczonych polskich w XIX wieku związane były z rozwojem narodowych filologii jako nauk uniwersyteckich i z fascynacją prapoczątkami Słowian na początku tego stulecia. Do zainteresowania „runami słowiańskimi” przyczyniały się także idee pansłowiańskie i motywowane często politycznie próby odtworzenia starożytnych początków własnego narodu. Teorie o słowiańskim alfabecie i jego wschodnim, starożytnym pochodzeniu rozwijane już przez uczonych XVIII-wiecznych znalazły kontynuację w pismach i badaniach historyków, filologów i archeologów następnego stulecia (Lelewel, Surowiecki, Cybulski). Niekrytyczne podejście do źródeł powodowało, że za autentyczne uznawano rzekome napisy runiczne na tzw. idolach z Prillvitz czy na kamieniach mikorzyńskich. Teorie o runicznym piśmie słowiańskim zostały obalone u schyłku XIX wieku, wraz z rozwojem szkoły pozytywistycznej w historiografii i tworzeniem się nowoczesnej metodologii badań historycznych i filologicznych (Estreicher, Małecki, Brückner).