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## SHAPING THE COMMUNAL PAST, TINKERING WITH THE COMMUNAL PAST. A FEW NOTES IN THE MARGIN OF PIOTR OKNIŃSKI'S BOOK

Review article of: Piotr Okniński, *Wehikuly pamięci. Przeszłość i władza w dawnym Krakowie (do końca XVIII w.)* [Vehicles of Memory: The Past and Power in Old Kraków (Until the End of the Eighteenth Century)], Warszawa, 2023, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 266 pp.

### Abstract

The article discusses a thought-provoking – though not entirely unproblematic – attempt to investigate attitudes towards the past in the urban context of premodern Poland. The work in question, Piotr Okniński's monograph on the creation of official historical narratives of the city of Kraków, is examined against the broader backdrop of both Polish and international scholarly discourse. This discourse concerns the mechanisms of collective memory and its politically motivated suppression, the instruments of remembrance, and the active role of urban elites in shaping an authorised version of the communal past.

**Keywords:** pre-modern Kraków, urban elites, urban chanceries, collective memory, communal past

“Who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present, controls the past”.<sup>1</sup> The famous quotation from George Orwell's seminal novel, *1984*, is the first that comes to the reader's mind when approaching the monograph of Piotr Okniński on the ways and tools of shaping an image of the communal past in pre-modern Kraków.

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<sup>1</sup> George Orwell, *1984* (London, 1949).

The book evolved from his long-term research on the dynamics of collective memory and attitudes toward the past in the urban environment of late medieval Poland.<sup>2</sup> Now, the chronological scope of his study has enlarged to encompass the late eighteenth century, i.e. the end of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The goal is to analyse, in a long-term perspective, the systematic and intentional efforts of the Kraków elites to create and control the 'official' narrative about their communal past. In the author's opinion, this narrative "would reinforce the legal and institutional foundations of the city and, at the same time, it would justify the superiority of the urban elites towards their co-citizens" (p. 10). The event with which the book opens is the visit to Kraków of the last Polish king, Stanisław August Poniatowski, in 1787, during which he inspected the municipal archives and sites that bear witness to the city's glorious history. It marked the symbolic closure of the process of shaping the official version of Kraków's history (and, sometimes, of tinkering with it). The choice of Kraków as the object of investigation was by no means accidental, and not only because of the city's special role throughout Polish history. Undoubtedly, the amount of sources available for the study exceeds that of all other urban settlements in the pre-modern Polish lands. However, the author does not claim to utilise all available sources from such an extended period systematically, but rather to provide a series of close-ups that showcase four spectacular examples of creating, in a goal-oriented manner, a narrative about the communal past. These close-ups are presented in four chapters.

The key concept of the study is the notion of 'vehicles of memory' (*wehikuly pamięci*), borrowed from the work of the distinguished Polish historian Aleksander Gieysztor. In a somewhat unclear definition, they are described as "various institutional mechanisms serving to secure, to evoke, and to shape a communal past in the practice of municipal government" (p. 12). The reader quickly gets the impression that these 'vehicles' are instead carriers of a narrative, understood also in a purely material sense: written texts (which are considered also as insignia of power), visual images, buildings, and the spatial organisation of the city itself.

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<sup>2</sup> See especially: Piotr Okniński, 'Oficjalna przeszłość miasta', in Halina Manikowska (ed.), *Przeszłość w kulturze średniowiecznej Polski*, ii (Warszawa, 2018), 177–201.

Another key concept is the notion of urban 'elites'. In the author's view, the core of the Kraków elite in the late medieval and early modern periods was the municipal council; however, within this highest organ of local government, another "informal" elite (p. 11) could be distinguished, one based on wealth and education. In a broad sense, officials from administrative and legal institutions in Kraków also belonged to these elites, starting with the professionals of the written word working at the municipal chancery. This institution is rightly presented in the study as a "laboratory, in which various strategies of the politics of memory were elaborated and implemented" (p. 12). However, one regrets that the author did not attempt to answer the question of how many people we are talking about when discussing the Kraków elites in subsequent centuries,<sup>3</sup> nor did he provide even a brief sketch of the development of the municipal institutions in the early modern period.

The first chapter discusses the role of Kraków City Hall (demolished in 1820) as a material and symbolic cradle of self-awareness and self-government for the urban community. The importance of this building resulted from the fact that not only the municipal chancery, an institution of public trust, was located there, together with the archives and treasury, but also the chamber where the municipal council gathered ("*izba pańska*", the Lords' chamber), and – last but not least – the councillors' chapel.<sup>4</sup> The city hall was also the centre

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<sup>3</sup> This concerns especially the period after 1500. Before, the data for such estimates can be found in Marcin Starzyński, *Krakowska rada miejska w średniowieczu* (Kraków, 2010) (German edition: *Das mittelalterliche Krakau. Der Stadtrat im Herrschaftsgefüge der polnischen Metropole* [Köln–Weimar–Wien, 2015]). Some attempts to change general opinions about the functioning of urban elites into hard numbers can be found in the scholarly literature. See e.g. Bastian Walter, *Informationen, Wissen und Macht. Akteure und Techniken städtischer Außenpolitik: Bern, Straßburg und Basel im Kontext der Burgunderkriege (1468–1477)* (Stuttgart, 2012). When analysing the forging of far-reaching political strategies by the elites of three powerful cities in the frontier area between Burgundy and the Swiss Confederation, the author estimates that no more than thirty or forty men were involved in the decision-making process. On the definitions of the term 'urban elites', see the still relevant remarks by Philippe Braunstein, 'Pour une histoire des élites urbaines: vocabulaire, réalités et représentations', in *Les élites urbaines au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1997), 29–38.

<sup>4</sup> Most probably, such a chapel existed in the Kraków City Hall, considering that, from 1375 onwards, the chaplain of councillors had the right to celebrate Mass there (Okniński, *Wehikuly*, p. 81).

of urban space *par excellence*, as the market square surrounding it featured as the arena of public ceremonies and rituals. One of these ceremonies, the solemn taking of the oath of fidelity by the Kraków municipal council on 27 February 1425 in favour of King Władysław Jagiełło, his new-born son and the latter's future descendants, became the starting-point for the complex and multidimensional investigation of the role played by the municipal chancery in the creation of a discourse about the city's past. The ceremony, which would lead to a new royal confirmation of all earlier privileges for the city (1431), was preceded by tough negotiations between the king and the councillors. The skilful analysis of a description of the ceremony, dating probably from the early 1430s, as well as that of two versions of the oath by the patricians, suggests not only the existence of some earlier (direct) reports from this event, but also a deliberate effort to create a historical account. This analysis emphasises the active attitude of the municipal government, which was able to negotiate successfully with a ruler. The author argues that in this process, the creation, production, and keeping of written records played an essential role. Both the putting together and the later adjustments made in the (oldest known) official municipal cartulary from c. 1375 (the so-called '*Grabowski codex*') – a fundamental tool of urban memory – illustrate the flexible and so to say pro-active attitude of the chancery clerks towards the image of the past and their readiness to intervene in it. This explanation is very plausible, as it confirms observations by many scholars on the fluid nature of late medieval archival memory, even if the author decided not to consult the recent scholarly literature on this subject.<sup>5</sup> This fluid nature is also visible in the second official cartulary

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<sup>5</sup> In Polish scholarship, the recent literature on the social history of archives was discussed i.a. by Waldemar Chorażyczewski, *Zachęta do archiwistyki* (Toruń, 2022), and Anna Adamska, 'Archiwum – serce późnośredniowiecznej monarchii? Garść uwag o instytucjach piśmienności pragmatycznej jako czynnika modernizacji aparatu władzy', in *Monarchia, społeczeństwo, tożsamość. Studia z dziejów średniowiecza*, ed. by Katarzyna Gołąbek et al. (Warszawa, 2020), 51–66. The use of adequate scholarly literature could also throw additional light on the phenomenon (which the author could not convincingly explain) of attempts to restrict access to the municipal archives (p. 29). Limiting access to the information enclosed in the written records, was a common phenomenon in late medieval and early modern Europe, similar to the secrecy which strongly marked the functioning of municipal institutions. See e.g., Filippo De Vivo, 'Ordering the archive in early modern

of the Kraków municipality, the so-called '*Balthasar Behem codex*', an ever-growing book until the nineteenth century. In both cartularies, some charters were omitted or added outside the strict chronological order, whereas with other charters, a special layout or marginal notes were meant to emphasise their importance.

The examination of the use of official municipal cartularies in their role as material symbols of power, together with municipal seals and symbolic keys to the city gates, is a well-established practice as well. It is a great merit of the author to provide evidence for the public showing of all these artefacts, and of the reading aloud in public of charters and records important for the urban community (p. 30 ff.), especially considering certain opinions circulating in Polish scholarship which doubt the persistence of this practice in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>6</sup>

The discussion of the role of city hall in the gradual creation of an image of the communal past also touches upon one of the most important aspects of Kraków's communal identity, namely that it was a royal city, the capital of the Polish kingdom. The following chapters of the book demonstrate that the complex relationship between the city and the Crown was a subject of ongoing evaluation and redefinition. However, the first chapter suggests that for the Kraków elites, the status of a royal city was also a source of pride. While the whole urban space often became a stage for the State and Church ceremonies (coronations and funerals of the rulers, festive entries and processions),<sup>7</sup> the city hall showed the connection with the Crown in its own way: the walls of the Lords' chamber, in which

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Venice (1400–1650)', *Archival Science*, x, 3 (2010), 231–48; Marco Mostert and Anna Adamska (eds), *Writing and the Administration of Medieval Towns. Medieval Urban Literacy I* (Turnhout, 2014), part II: 'Urban Archives: Places of Power, Memory, and Secrets'.

<sup>6</sup> Piotr Węcowski, *Mazowsze w Koronie. Propaganda i legitymizacja władzy Kazimierza Jagiellończyka na Mazowszu* (Kraków, 2004), 328–31.

<sup>7</sup> See, among others, Urszula Borkowska, 'Theatrum ceremoniale at the Polish Court as a System of Social and Political Communication', in Anna Adamska and Marco Mostert (eds), *The Development of Literate Mentalities in East Central Europe* (Turnhout, 2004), 431–50. A very interesting comparative perspective of Vilnius as another royal (and ducal) city of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth can be found in Jakub Niedźwiedź, *Literacy in Medieval and Early Modern Vilnius. Forms of Writing and Rhetorical Spaces in the City* (Turnhout, 2023), 493–520.

the council gathered, were decorated with the depictions of Polish kings, made in the late sixteenth century.

The second chapter of the book shows the creation of Kraków's official past in a much longer chronological perspective, and this shows up the inadequacy of labels 'medieval' and 'early modern', still used in traditional scholarship. Here, the object of investigation is a list of Kraków councillors inserted into a monumental work of Bartosz Paprocki *Herby rycerstwa polskiego na pięćoro ksiąg rozdzielone* [The Heraldic Arms of the Polish Knighthood in Five Volumes], printed in Kraków in 1584. The presence of such a catalogue in a work devoted to the heraldic devices of noble clans is interesting in itself, but even more so is the fact that this list is accompanied by multiple annotations in Latin and Polish about the careers of councillors, their family connections, and also gives facts about some events relevant to the urban community. The author's assumption that this list of governors of the city represents an elaboration of a much earlier one seems well-founded. It is supported by recent research on the important role of lists and catalogues of members of all possible communities (also in the urban environment), featuring as the backbone of the liturgical and secular memory of a given community.<sup>8</sup> The complex quest for an original catalogue of Kraków councillors, which may have served as a source for the one included in the armorial, has led to a hypothesis about the existence of two accounts of the same kind. One of them may have been created at the very beginning of the sixteenth century on the occasion of the production of the monumental cartulary known as the *Balthasar Behem codex*. On the first folios of this cartulary, the list of Kraków councillors of 1503 was copied. In the author's opinion, this was organised according to "the same logic and formulary" as the catalogue in Paprocki's armorial (p. 64). However, one may also assume that the municipal chancery had started to produce lists of urban officials as early as the last quarter of the fourteenth century, as part of a broader attempt to 'organise' and order the institutional memory of the communal city, both in its secular and spiritual dimensions. Other forms of this action would

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<sup>8</sup> Although the author provides a bibliography of works concerning catalogues of urban officials, one might consider also the scholarly literature on the essential role of lists of persons as a tool of social memory in the medieval period, e.g.: *Le pouvoir des listes au Moyen Âge*, vols i–iii (Paris, 2019–2023).

have been the production of the earliest known municipal cartulary, the *Grabowski codex*, and obtaining the liberty to celebrate Mass in the town hall from the ecclesiastic authorities.

From the point of view of the main topic of the monograph, i.e. deliberate efforts to create a narrative about the city's past, the most interesting are chapters three and four. They provide a real sense of drama. Here, reminiscences of the so-called 'revolt of Kraków's mayor (*vogt*) Albert against Duke Władysław Łokietek (1311–1312) are discussed. Clearly, this had been one of the most traumatic events in the history of the urban community. It seriously weakened its economic and political position for almost half a century and caused a significant intervention by the ruler in the urban space. The author is right in pointing out that in the commemoration of the revolt, oral and written narratives intertwine with each other. One can see it, for instance, in the so-called *Song of the Kraków Mayor Albert*, preserved in two manuscripts from the fifteenth century. Even more important are two other observations: that throughout the following centuries, in the accounts of the events anti-German sentiments played an ever more important role; and that the discourse on this fragment of the city's past was monopolised from the beginning by external agents, i.e. authors originating from the Kraków cathedral clergy or from the nobility – milieus ill-disposed towards the city and its ambitions. The author demonstrates that, at first glance, Kraków's elites appeared almost powerless against the image constructed based on Jan Długosz's narrative by early modern authors. Drawing on fourteenth-century accounts, they all presented Kraków as a city controlled by Germans (the 'eternal enemies' of the Polish nation), a city that was despicably ungrateful towards its royal benefactors. In fact, however, the Crown became a recourse for Kraków citizens in their efforts to suppress, or at least minimise, the recollection of the revolt. Not only did they complain directly to the king about the insults and slander produced by the noblemen,<sup>9</sup> but they also worked successfully towards obtaining new royal privileges, such as the one

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<sup>9</sup> The author's pretence that he is the first one to analyse the charter of Władysław Jagiełło dated 23 Feb. 1398, concerning the conflict between the city and a nobleman Pietrasz of Zabawa, is unjustified. See Anna Adamska, 'Słowo władzy i władza słowa. Język polskich dokumentów monarszych doby średniowiecza', in Andrzej Marzec and Maciej Wilamowski (eds), *Król w Polsce XIV i XV wieku* (Kraków, 2007), 70–1.

from 1493, which was as valuable as the privileges obtained by the nobility. Nonetheless, a real counterbalance to the narrative about Mayor Albert's rebellion could be best achieved by elaborating a positive narrative about the city's past. This had to be the function of the story of the support provided to the Piast Duke Leszek the Black [Czarny] by the German inhabitants of Kraków during a Mongol attack, or during the uprising of the local knights, analysed in chapter four of the monograph. The author follows the trail of the custom privilege from 1288, by which the duke rewarded Kraków's fidelity and courage. In the context of a 'memory war' concerning the aforementioned rebellion, this charter was considered such an important piece of evidence for the positive image of the city's past that, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the chancery clerks decided to copy it into the *'Balthasar Behem codex'* directly after the charter of the foundation of the city. Its significance was reinforced by a special layout. The author argues convincingly that the same privilege became a crucial step in the struggle of the Kraków patricians to acquire the same rights as members of the noble estate enjoyed in the sixteenth century. The story that Leszek the Black had already given Kraków town dwellers noble status evolved in thoroughly analysed historical accounts over the centuries. Nonetheless, in the end, it could not counterbalance the negative narrative about the city's past, overgrown by elements of ethnic and social tensions. In this context, in the eighteenth century the clerks of the municipal chancery (them once again!) developed the idea that the urban law was given to Kraków in prehistorical times by the legendary forefather of the city – Krak (Krakus). This idea seems to have grown out of despair. One has to agree with the author that an earlier move would have been better: i.e., the effort made by patricians to subsidise Bartosz Paprocki, convincing him to make room in his prestigious armorial for the coats of arms of Kraków and for the solemn list of the city's councillors.

The limits of a review make it impossible to discuss the impressive number of subjects, themes, and sources considered in this monograph in detail. One can praise the author's inquisitive temperament as well as his skills in source criticism and in the so-called auxiliary sciences of medieval (and early modern) history. The book is written in a clear, almost flawless academic Polish. It reads well, despite the abundance of threads and arguments. And yet, it leaves a reader dissatisfied in some respects.



The first reason for discontent is the absence of a broader historical context of the processes being described. We don't hear about how the efforts of Kraków elites, continuing over five centuries to shape a view of the city's past, were influenced, for instance, by the factual transfer of the capital of the Polish Kingdom to Warsaw (1596), or by the clear pauperisation of the city in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This lack of a solid historical background makes it impossible to conclude whether the efforts in shaping Kraków's past were sufficient to "justify the superiority of the urban elites". In the book, these elites are presented in a kind of social vacuum, whereas it would be justified to ask how the actions of creating a version of the communal past and tinkering with it were received by other social groups in the city.

One may regret that the sketching of a broader comparative perspective for the phenomena under discussion was not entirely successful. Although in the footnotes a serious amount of publications in various languages concerning urban culture in the Polish lands, in the area of 'German' law, and the West is adduced, this literature has not been 'digested' properly to enhance the analysis. For example, the discussion of shaping conflicting memories of the revolt of Mayor Albert would certainly have profited from taking into consideration the extensive research of social unrest and revolts in late medieval Flanders, France, and England.<sup>10</sup>

A superficial use of scholarly literature is also visible in the setting up of the book's theoretical frame. The author uses rather thoughtlessly (often as synonyms) such terms as 'culture of memory' (*kultura pamięci*), 'collective memory' (*pamięć zbiorowa*), and 'historical memory' (*pamięć historyczna*), without seeming to be aware of the complex scholarly discussion concerning these terms. Deeper reflection on the concepts and mechanisms of 'social' and 'cultural memory', on the 'uses of the past', as well as on 'remembrance' and 'oblivion',<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> A series of earlier publications on revolts in Flemish towns reappeared recently as a collection: Jelle Haemers, Jan Dumolyn, *Communes and Conflict: Urban Rebellion in Late Medieval Flanders* (Leiden, 2023). See also Vincent Challet, "'Peasants' revolts memories: *Damnatio memoriae* or hidden memories?", in Lucie Dolezalová (ed.), *The Making of Memory in the Middle Ages* (Leiden-Boston, 2010), 391–413.

<sup>11</sup> From the abundant literature on these subjects see most recently: Gerhard Schwedler (ed.), *A Cultural History of Memory in the Middle Ages* (London – New York, 2021); Patrick Geary, 'Remembering and Forgetting Phantoms of Remembrance:

and going beyond the (after all, limited) urban context, would have made the analysis and its conclusions more profound. It seems that solving puzzles of source criticism was closer to the author's heart than the in-depth interpretation of phenomena under discussion. The conclusion of the book, voiced in the very last sentence, that "a *sui generis* ennoblement<sup>12</sup> of the ideology of power and of historical memory of Kraków elites puts a question mark on the universal character of classical questionnaires of research of urban culture" (p. 210) could be disputed as well. Once again, a serious consultation of the scholarly literature would have shown that the 'ennoblement' of urban culture was a common phenomenon in late medieval and early modern Europe, and that this is not an adequate explanation of the processes we can see in Kraków.<sup>13</sup> This is one of many occurrences when one realises that we are indeed dealing with an inspiring and courageous book, but that the subject itself deserves further discussion.

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Social Memory and Oblivion in Medieval History after Twenty Years', in Sebastian Scholz and Gerhard Schwedler (eds), *Creative Selection between Emending and Forming Medieval Memory* (Berlin, 2022), 15–26. The argument that shaping an image of the communal past "never became an object of an in-dept analysis in the European scholarship" (p. 10, fn. 12) can be contradicted. See e.g. Jean-Marie Moeglin, 'Les élites urbaines et l'histoire de leur ville', in *Les élites urbaines*, 351–83; Marc von der Höh, *Erinnerungskultur und frühe Kommune. Formen und Funktionen des Umgangs mit der Vergangenheit im hochmittelalterlichen Pisa (1050–1150)* (Berlin, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> By this, the author most probably means using a set of ideological tools typical for the culture of nobility.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g. Herman Pleij, 'Restyling "Wisdom", Remodeling the Nobility, and Caricaturing the Peasant: Urban Literature in the Late Medieval Low Countries', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, xxxii, 4 (2002), 689–704; Michael Foster, 'From courtesy to urbanity in late medieval England', *Parergon*, xxix, 1 (2012), 27–46.

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