

The Remembrance of the Deceased in the Traditional Polish Culture of the Middle Ages

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In the Middle Ages, Polish Christian holidays remained consistent, except for minor temporary deviations. They included the basic structure of pre-Christian rituals. Yet, traces of the old Slavic ritual calendar can be clearly identified in the Polish and Czech sources from the fourteenth- and fifteenth-centuries. Those were rituals and practices of the ancient, broad context of beliefs which confirmed that certain traditional attitudes and behaviour were still very much alive. The Slavic calendar of annual rites was consistent with the crucial moments of the solar cycle. The whole year was imbued with ritual contacts with the dead, waiting for their arrival, presence, and supporting them in various established ways.

Traditional beliefs and practices intertwined with the dominant Christian behaviour and attitudes associated with death and funerals, as well as the methods recommended by the Church to support the soul of the deceased. A Christian funeral, crucial for the salvation of the dead, consisted of ritual celebrations, gestures and a series of prayers recited for the deceased.

The circle of beliefs and ideas about the other world was an area where religious syncretism was very clear even many centuries after the initial Christianization. The remaining fragments of the ancient Slavic conceptions of the afterlife, plucked from the once coherent systems, still coexisted with the assimilated threads of Christian teaching in the waning centuries of the Middle Ages. They were expressed in the efforts to secure well-being, supernatural care and the integration with dead ancestors.

Introduction

In the late Middle Ages, the increasing concern for salvation as the full reward for fulfilling the precepts of faith and the Church was a sign of uncertainty about the posthumous fate of the human being. Exertions such as prayers and the final parts of religious songs contained an element of hope for the successful completion of the earthly existence. All eschatological issues had a widespread foundation. The doctrine of the Church, a component of which is the doctrine of reward and

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punishment for sin and the posthumous fate of the human soul, was common to all countries of the Western *christianitas*. They also shared the basic teachings and the essential religious content which were transmitted to the faithful during sermons and confession, and placed on the walls of churches in the form of iconography.

In recent decades, the French, Anglo-Saxon and American studies which culminated in the extensive, synthetic works by Philippe Ariès and Michel Vovelle, identified a broad program of study of the evolution of attitudes towards death in the long term.¹ They also influenced the analytical trend in research which relates to the ideas, rituals, practices, devotional behaviours, and collective feelings associated with a larger discourse of death.²

The Christian doctrine of reward and punishment after death was confronted with the local traditional beliefs. Initially, they clearly emerged from Slavic paganism, and later, after being forgotten, were manifested in practices and attitudes which theologians refer to as superstitious. Studying the phenomena of medieval culture in the field of collective mentality and imagination raises questions about the possibility of moving to the level of the common and the uneducated. Those "*illiterati et idiotae*" did not leave any direct records of their thoughts, feelings and ideas. A look at the pre-Christian layer of the Slavic notion of the world of the dead is only possible due to the writings left by theologians and preachers who meticulously recorded all traditional folk beliefs and practices in order to stigmatize them as errors and excesses in faith and Christian worship. In its teachings about punishment after death, the Church aimed primarily at effectiveness, and hence agreed to various concessions to the traditional image which was inherent in the minds and imagination of the lay faithful.

There are a number of legitimate and compelling questions about the meaning of the remembrance of the deceased in most Christian holidays, and how far the compromise reached between the practitioners of pre-Christian origin and the Christian eschatological content and ideas. The answers are contained in the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century synodal statutes, texts of sermons and the reflections of theologians, scholars and chroniclers who studied the issue of attitudes and the behaviour of the faithful which grew out of their native traditions. These sources confirm the observance of feasts of the dead in various seasons of the year and practices related to faith in the life of the deceased, which were not accepted by the clergy. The confrontation of the Church with the content hidden behind the annual rites leads to rich and complex issues. One of the battlefields of this clash was where the Christian eschatology met folk beliefs which contained the echoes of archaic notions of the fate of the dead.

The Christian worldview was influenced by traditional ideas such as folk beliefs, attitudes and practices of the local population, especially in rural areas.³ In the Middle Ages, Polish Christian holidays remained consistent with the basic structure

1 Ariès 1981; Vovelle 1983.

2 Paxton 1990; Finucane 1981, 40–60; Caciola 1996; Braet & Verbeke (eds.) 1983; Lecouteux 1990.

3 Brown 1979, 1–115.

of pre-Christian rituals, except for minor temporary deviations.⁴ Yet, traces of the old Slavic ritual calendar can be clearly identified in the Polish and Czech sources from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These are rituals and practices of the old and wider belief context which confirm the liveliness of certain traditional attitudes and behaviours. The Slavic calendar of annual rites was consistent with the crucial moments of the solar cycle. The whole year was imbued with ritual contacts with the dead, waiting for their arrival, presence, and supporting them in various established ways.

In the traditional culture, the world of the living remained in a stable and close connection with the world of the dead.⁵ Stanisław of Skarbimierz (ca. 1360–1431), a fifteenth-century theologian, preacher and rector of the University of Crakow, explained in one of his sermons that it is impossible for the dying and the deceased to inform the living about their posthumous fate, either because they are condemned, remain in chains and cannot return, or they have become saints, fix their eyes on God and will not say anything until he sends them, or are doing their time in purgatory and cannot reveal anything to people without God's command.⁶ The preacher pointed to the beliefs regarding the possibility of maintaining contact with the dead and the desire to learn about the posthumous fate of loved ones. The relationship was to be established at the initiative of the dead, whose fate remained at the sole disposal of God. Stanisław addressed the community of the faithful with reasoning based on the Christian doctrine which proved the groundlessness of such an attitude and acknowledged such behaviour as sinful. Jacob of Paradyz (about 1383–1464), an eminent scholar and theologian, reproached the faithful for asking old women for advice and about the whereabouts of their dead mothers.⁷

Elements of the remembrance of the dead appeared in most Christian holidays and related folk customs. The souls of the dead which were properly taken care of after death left the mundane world with the prospect of numerous subsequent visits. Establishing contact with the dead in their own world, outside the human settlements, at crossroads, on graves or in other places was to make souls share their knowledge of the future with the living. In their relation with the community of the living, the deceased possessed magical qualities. As beings which belonged to another world they were believed to possess the knowledge of its secrets and the ability to reveal signs of a divinatory nature concerning the future of the living. People were awaiting the souls of their loved ones on particular occasions called

4 Geremek 1985, 432–482.

5 On the ties between the living and the dead in the early Middle Ages, see Geary 1995, 77–92.

6 Chmielowska (ed.) 1979, *Stanisław ze Skarbimierza Sermones sapientiales*, 2, 86–87.

7 Porębski (ed.) 1978, *Jakub z Paradyża Wybór tekstów*, 305: "*Mortua est alteri mater sua, inquit a vetula, an fit in poenis sive in gaudio.*" John of Freiburg considered the desire to learn about the posthumous fate of loved ones as the fulfillment of the natural human desire for knowledge; see Ioannes de Friburgo (1518), *Summa confessorum*, fol. 32 verso b: "*Nulla autem inordinatio in hac inquisitione videtur, si aliquis requirat a moriente cognoscere statum eius post mortem subiciendo tamen hoc divino iudicio. Unde nulla ratio videtur, quare debet dici hoc esse peccatum, nisi forte ex dubitatione fidei de futuro statu quasi tentando inquirent.*"

zaduszki (All Souls'). The arrival of these souls, however, took place beyond the reach of the senses of the living.

As for the research questions, it is necessary to consider the practices which commemorated the dead, as well as the forms of support for the souls of those who had passed away, and the Christian ways of supporting them. These problems seem to be particularly important because the Slavic world of the dead was obscured by the Christian doctrine of reward and punishment after death. Nevertheless, the reception of the West-Slavic eschatological system did not erase the late medieval fear of the dead and the need to support them by means different from those which are taught by the Church. All these elements influenced the development of a specific syncretism of beliefs which was reflected in the traditional Polish culture of the Middle Ages. It was represented in the behaviour and attitudes of the broad masses of society where the Slavic pre-Christian beliefs merged with the Christian content. Among the research sources for this issue are statutes of diocesan synods, fragments of sermons, treatises by theologians and preachers, as well as records in the annals.

In the Circle of the Eschatological Folklore

Among the medieval annual ceremonials, the winter cycle of rituals seemed particularly important. It combined the winter solstice, the transition from the old to the new year and the birth of Jesus. The symbolism of that "boundary" time was complex. In the traditional Polish culture, Christmas was called *Gody*. Not only did the name refer to the holiday itself, but also to the days from Christmas to Epiphany. The etymology of the word in Slavic languages refers to the dignity, relevance and the proper moment, emphasizing the time of holidays and celebrations.⁸ The Slavic language background, as well as historical and ethnographic data, indicate that the term originally referred to the initiation of the rites in honour of the deceased ancestors, the collective *zaduszki*, celebrated before the start of each rural season, as well as to individual *zaduszki* observed several times, a certain number of days after someone's death.⁹

For the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century inhabitants of the Polish lands, the Christmas period (*Gody*) was the culmination of the deepest and the most powerful ritual in the whole annual cycle. In a broader context, this finding can be applied to the area of Central and Eastern Europe. The exertions and activities undertaken during this period were supposed to provide success for the family, the farm and the ploughland until the next holidays. All the activities took on symptomatic significance. The culmination was the Christmas Eve supper, preceded by fasting and most probably derived from the ancient feast of abundance and prosperity.

⁸ *Słownik staropolski* 2 1956–1959, 446–447; Brückner 1993, 147–148.

⁹ Wojtyła-Świerzowska 1994, 17–18.

Christmas Eve was a particularly crucial time. It was the moment of separation from the old time, from everything that was unpleasant and imperfect, and the time of entering into a new and better time. Apparently, the usual hierarchy of social relations was suspended. Masters with their servants, the rich with the poor – at the Christmas Eve table everybody was equal and sat alongside each other, which obviously was not a common daily practice. This temporary equality was also manifested in giving gifts to the poor and allowing the servants to behave more freely.¹⁰

In addition to the suspension of social distinctions, the ontological order was also becoming unbalanced by blurring the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead. The mundane world and the afterlife merged and the souls of the ancestors came to reside among the living. The most intensive “visits” from the other side took place in the evening and on Christmas Eve. This was pointed out in the *Largum sero seu largissimus vesper* treatise by a Benedictine monk from Moravia, John of Holešova (1366–1436).¹¹

This little book written in 1400 and dedicated to Christmas Eve, was made to the order of the parish priest Przybysław of Łysa upon Elbe. Having doubts about the orthodoxy of many traditional Christmas rituals, Przybysław asked his friend to explain which of them could be observed and which ones were to be opposed. Not only is John’s treatise noteworthy because of the approach to folk religiosity, but also because of the popular Christmas Eve customs noted by and well-known to the author. John of Holešova complained that on that day divinations (*sortilegia*) grow more than on any other day of the year. He listed making wishes, gift-giving, eating bread and crumpets from quality white flour, spreading straw on the floors of residential chambers and churches, the game of dice, piling money on the table to multiply one’s wealth, telling fortunes from cut-open fruit, refusing to lend heat from the hearth and loud singing of carols. John of Holešova also mentioned that some Christians used to leave bread for pagan idols so that they could come at night and feed on the leftovers.¹² The idea of idols eating food was absurd for him. Assigning material needs to those demons was considered by him a vulgar error. He compared this custom to the tradition of bringing food to the graves of the deceased for their souls to dine.¹³ John of Holešova judged the aforementioned

10 Wojciechowska 2000, 46–47.

11 Fasseau (ed.) 1761, *Largissimus vesper seu colledae historia*; Brückner 1916, 308–351; *ibidem* the edition of the treatise. Two manuscripts of the treatise remain in the possession of the Jagiellonian Library, sign. 1700 and 1707. For a shortened Czech translation, see Havránek & Hrabák 1957 (eds.) *Výbor z české literatury od počátků po dobu Husovu*, 743–749; Bylina 1998, 69–73.

12 Brückner (ed.) 1916, *Przyczynki do dziejów języka*, 332–334, 336–339.

13 The motif of setting a table on Christmas Eve resembles the rite observed on the Roman New Year which was described by Caesarius of Arles (ca. 470–542). A table was set for the goddesses of destiny, who usually appeared on special moments such as the turn of the old and the new year. This legend, in the sense of literary tradition, reached Central Europe as an echo of the beliefs of the Roman province through Caesarius of Arles and with the help of William of Auvergne (b. after 1180–1249), a thirteenth-century bishop of Paris, as shown by D. Harmening. See Harmening 1979, 121 and further.

habits according to their conformity with the Christian tradition as well as Christian attitudes and intentions.

Christmas All-Souls rites are found in the folklore of the whole of European culture and reveal a huge wealth of observances and customs. It was believed that during the period of the solstice the mundane world would open to the visitors from the underworld. People shared their food with the shadows of the dead (leaving or spilling food and drinks), heat and light (lighting candles and bonfires), and took precautions so as not to interfere with, and especially not to harm the deceased.¹⁴ Christmas Eve was one of the most important continuations of the ancient All Souls, repeated several times during the year. The souls of the ancestors used to become (as in some other periods) guardians of the family hearth and warrantors of a good harvest. Obviously, the belief in the earthly stay of the souls of the dead, so contradictory to the Christian religion, must have led to repugnance and opposition from preachers and theologians.

After the Christmas period, winter would deprive the deceased of activity for some time and a kind of stupor was attributed to them at that time. The winter sleep of the dead ended with the first signs of the spring recovery, as is evidenced in the mid- and late-medieval Czech and Polish syllabic calendars, the so called *cyzjojany* (Lat. *cisiojanus*). Their secular content, although subservient to the superior liturgical content and the elements of religious education, refers to some ancient beliefs and ideas. *Be the snake alive. Spring [Bud' had živ. Vesna]*, the oldest thirteenth-century Czech *cisiojanus*, reports the awakening of snakes at the beginning of the second half of February, which was identified in the folk culture of the West and East Slavs with the souls of the dead and the underworld.¹⁵

A long series of spring rites began in March, with their first culmination around the date of the spring equinox. It was a kind of spring All Souls' cycle, repeated from time to time with an uneven intensity of beliefs and celebrations associated with the dead. The beginning of the spring revival of nature was a signal for the dead to awake and for their impending visit on earth. Late-medieval Czech and Polish texts contain descriptions of rituals and practices loaded with their long-term coexistence with the Christian cult and influenced by the Christian liturgical calendar. The Slav-wide early spring rite of carrying the effigy of Death beyond the boundaries of human settlements concerned, among other things, the souls of the dead. Such efforts were possibly aimed at various demonic powers and against the deceased who died from unnatural causes, that is "the impurely deceased". In Poland, the effigy was called *Marzanna*, *Mara* or *Marena*, which in the West Slavic languages have an etymological connection with death (*mór*). It was made with a bundle of hemp or straw, dressed in human clothes and carried away beyond the

14 Bylina 1992.

15 Nováková 1967, 27–28; Bylina 1999, 25–26.

city gates with superstitious, rhythmical singing and dancing.¹⁶ The noise made during this procession was supposed to drive away evil spirits and prevent them from causing harm to people. Such rites were attended by residents of villages, towns and cities alike.

We are therefore faced with a popular ritual which was not limited to rural environments only. This ritual was a common concern of the whole community. The destruction of the effigy by dropping it into the water, swamps or mud was supposed to prevent death in the following year and dismiss the inner conviction of the inevitability of leaving this world.¹⁷ Getting rid of this symbol of winter deadness was considered a dangerous act. The hostile force which was being destroyed could reveal its destructive powers even at that very last moment of its existence. The fear of the unknown power made the participants hastily leave the theatre of the effigy's destruction. Since the escape was an attempt to achieve liberation from evil forces, those who fell during the return home were predicted to die soon. The ritual of dumping the effigy was observed on the fourth Sunday of fasting, called the lethal or white Sunday (in the liturgy "*Laetare*"). This term suggests a trace of the Indo-European custom devoted to death and the dead.¹⁸ One of the many meanings of this content-rich custom can be associated with the habit of sending signals by water, a kind of "messenger" to the other world, in order to encourage its residents to renew their interest in the affairs of the living.

The written sources indicate an intense celebration of the earthly residence of the dead during Holy Week. The East Slavs used to contact the deceased through the preparation of a feast and ritual baths. A traditional festival called *Radunica* was celebrated. In Slavic languages, its name may be etymologically derived from "ancestry" (*ród*), "parents" (*rodzice*) or "the memory of the grandfathers" (*dziady*).¹⁹ In Poland, the days preceding Easter, that is Holy Wednesday and Holy Thursday (in English also known as Spy Wednesday and Maundy Thursday), were of particular importance for the cult of the dead. In the fifteenth century on the Holy Wednesday people piled up branches and lit special bonfires (called *grumadki*) to warm the souls of the deceased ancestors.²⁰ The few written sources confirm that on the

16 This rite is confirmed in synodal statutes of Prague from 1366 and 1384, synodal statutes of the Bishop of Poznań Andrzej Łaskarzowicz from Gostawice (1362–1426) from around 1420, Jana Długosz's Chronicles, a part of a sermon by Stanisław from Skarbimierz and a fragment from Marcin Bielski's Chronicles from the sixteenth century. See Höfler (ed.) 1862, *Concilia Pragensia 1353-1413*, 63–64; Sawicki (ed.) 1952, *Concilia Poloniae* 7, 156; Długossy 1961, *Annales seu cronicae incliti Regni Poloniae*, lib. 1, 166, 244; Zawadzki (ed.) 1978, *Stanisław ze Skarbimierza, Sermones super „Gloria in excelsis”*, 104; Bielski 1764, *Kronika polska niegdyś w Krakowie*, 34.

17 Höfler (ed.) 1862, *Concilia Pragensia*, 64: "[...] in eorum ignominiam asserentes quod mors eis ultra nocere non debeat tanquam ab ipsorum terminis sit consumata et totaliter exterminata".

18 Gieysztor 2006, 242.

19 Bylin 1992, 28.

20 Belcarzowa 1981 (ed.), *Głosy polskie w łacińskich kazaniach średniowiecznych* 1, 57: "Item feria quarta magna admoneantur ne crement focos grumathky ardentes secundum ritum paganorum in commerationem animarum suarum cariorum. Item qui mentiuntur, qui dicunt quo animae ad illum ignem veniant et se illic calefaciant."

following day, Holy Thursday, the souls visited homes. Stanisław of Skarbimierz mentioned the habit of leaving the dishes unwashed, in order that the souls of deceased could dine on the leftovers.²¹

Under the influence of the stories circulating among the people, an anonymous preacher of the Benedictine Monastery of St. Cross on Łysa Góra completed the reflections of the Krakow scholar adding information about the home spirit called *uboże*. Every Thursday and on Holy Thursday, *uboże* was offered a food sacrifice. The unnamed author explained that contrary to what “the silly and vain people believed”, it was usually the dog, not the spirit, to fed on the nourishment.²² *Uboże* impersonated the remembrance of the dead associated with compassion for the poor posthumous fate of the miserable soul wandering somewhere in an indeterminate, empty and barren space. The exiled soul pined for the loved ones. The homelessness of the soul determined the most important feature of the traditional vision of the afterlife and its destiny after death.²³

In another sermon, Stanisław of Skarbimierz reproved those who sacrificed to demons, asked them for something or left some food for them on plants and trees.²⁴ The author of the sermon did not clearly indicate the relationship between the domestic demons and the souls of ancestors, but showed the similarity in the concern for both categories of beings from another world.

Although the Polish late-medieval sources describe customs opposed by preachers and theologians, we do not know what changes they had undergone since the pre-Christian period. Generally, however, they present basic forms of support for the souls of the deceased: leaving food for them and lighting bonfires *secundum ritum paganorum* in order to help the arriving spirits keep warm. The general goal was a warm welcome for the souls of the deceased loved ones.

The traditional annual Slavic celebrations were concentrated in the period between Easter and Pentecost and contained many minor exertions which expressed the cult of the dead and the belief in the presence of their souls among the living. The Czech chronicler Kosmas noted a custom known to him from the twelfth century. On Tuesday or Wednesday after Pentecost, villagers celebrated over their dead “dancing with face masks attached and calling the shadows of the dead.” He also reported that the Slavs believed that the souls of the dead somehow resided at crossroads; hence they used to build shelters and wooden booths for

21 Chmielowska (ed.) 1979, *Stanisław ze Skarbimierza Sermones sapientiales*, 90: “Nonnulli sunt, qui non lavant scutellas post caenam feria quinta magna ad pascendum animas. Stulti, credentes spiritus corporalibus indigere, cum scriptum sit: Spiritus carnem et ossa non habet [Luc.24,39]. Si ergo carnem non habet corporalibus pasci non indigent. Aliqui dimittunt remanentias ex industria in scutellis, tunc post caenam quasi, ad nutriendum animas; quod est erroneum.”

22 Brückner 1895, 345.

23 Bracha 2011, 49–70.

24 Zawadzki (ed.) 1978. *Stanislaus de Scarbimiria, Sermones super “Gloria in excelsis”*, 104: “Daemonibus sacrificia offerunt vel ab eis responsa petunt [...] aut in arboribus vel plantis aliquod nutrimentis ponunt.”

their souls to rest in.²⁵ In a burial custom a few centuries later, bundles of straw were thrown out at the intersections of roads and at the borders of villages for the souls of the dead to rest on.²⁶ People who died prematurely or from unnatural causes, especially suicide, were also buried in these places. They became dangerous in the magical-religious sense. Their spirits wandered in and inhabited different places away from human settlements.



Picture 1. In the Biblical story (1 Sam. 28:3–25), King Saul who had expelled all necromancers wished to communicate with the dead prophet Samuel about his war against the Philistines. For this purpose, he visited the witch of Endor who summoned the ghost of Samuel.

The relation between the souls of the dead and the cyclical seasonal changes made them participate more closely in the life of nature. The spring awakening of the dead began at a time when plants were coming back to life and arable land was being prepared for sowing. The ritual lighting of spring fires stimulated vegetation and could be one of the signals inducing the activity of the sleeping souls. In the Slavic languages, the proximity of two words is very meaningful: the verb for “light a fire” (*krzesać*) is very similar in pronunciation to “resurrect” (*wskrzeszać*).²⁷ The traditional cult of the dead weakened over the summer, probably because of intensive harvesting.

Traces of the autumn earthly stay of the souls (autumn All Souls) have been quite strongly blurred. A Polish rhyming calendar from the second half of the

25 Bretholz (ed.) 1923, *Cosmae Pragensis: Chronica*, lib. III, cap. 1. 161.

26 Fischer 1921, 330–331.

27 Tyszkiewicz 1976, 591–597.

fifteenth century placed between St. Francis “grating hemp” (4 October) and St. Hedwig (15 October) a day or a few days in which peasants were preparing a ritual feast for the dead (a wake).²⁸ This record indicates the habit of preparing a special meal for the souls of ancestors or the deceased loved ones which might have also been consumed in their honour.

Later, just before the winter, the spirits of the dead revived around 13 December, the day perceived by the people as the shortest of the year. Some echoes of the fear of that day can be found in the medieval Polish proverb “Stay at home Lucy” (*“Łucyja siedź doma”*).²⁹ The invisible souls of ancestors did not avoid visiting their descendants, adapting to their way of feeling the rhythm and the changes taking place in the environment.

The symbolic nature of rituals meant that the time of celebration took on special characteristics. It was the time of re-integration with the sacred order, a time when the earth and the underworld became reunited. The dead would leave their graves and come to visit the living. This was normal during the suspension of the common order while the change between seasons was taking place. As the time of the visit was coming to an end, the dead were seen off until the time of the next celebration. Their constant presence was unwanted.

The Christian Concern for the Fate of the Soul

Traditional beliefs and practices intertwined with the dominant Christian behaviour and attitudes associated with death and the funeral, as well as the methods recommended by the Church to support the soul of the deceased.³⁰ A Christian funeral, crucial for the salvation of the dead, consisted of ritual celebrations, gestures and a series of prayers recited for the deceased. Poor people were buried naked or wrapped in straw. Most of the dead were wrapped in a shroud. The Church also tried to ensure a proper funeral for the poor, as evidenced in synodal acts. The statute of the Wrocław diocesan synod of 1446 ordered parish priests to serve the rich and the poor equally.³¹

The posthumous fate of the soul was influenced by a proper funeral service. From the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries we do not find any traces of gifts put into the grave which were supposed to help the deceased in the afterlife. Many different rituals over the dead body and the grave which, according to pre-Christian beliefs, were inevitable for the posthumous well-being of the dead, had been forgotten or rooted out by the Church. On the first evening after death, called “an empty evening”, relatives, neighbours and friends guarded the corpse. The

28 Fijałek 1927, 2445.

29 Vrtel-Wierczyński (ed.) 1952, *Średniowieczna poezja polska świecka*, 99.

30 Burgess 2000, 44–64; Caciola 2000, 66–86.

31 Sawicki (ed.) 1963, *Concilia Poloniae* 10, 454.

Polish name for this custom reflected the situation of the deceased person, not yet buried, no longer belonging to the world of the living but not fully belonging to the other world either.

The uncertainty of the posthumous fate of the human soul was expressed in the fifteenth-century Polish song "The soul has fled out of the body" ("*Dusza z ciała wyleciała*"). A soul, after leaving the body, arrives in a meadow and bursts into tears as it does not know where to go. An unnamed interlocutor takes it to paradise, to the kingdom of heaven.³² That theme of the insecurity and confusion of the soul also appeared in other beliefs, clearly Christianized, referring to the early afterlife phase of the human fate. An anonymous fifteenth-century Polish sermon reported that on the first night after death the soul stays with St. Gertrude, on the second with St. Michael and on the third night leaves for the designated place. On Saturday evening, the souls leave Purgatory and rest until Monday, until someone starts to work.³³



Picture 2. The pains of the souls in purgatory are depicted in this decorated initial by the workshop of Gerard Horenbout (1465–1541) from about 1500.

³² Michałowska 1995, 512.

³³ Bracha 2007 (ed.) *Nauczanie kaznodziejskie w Polsce późnego średniowiecza. Sermones dominicales et festuales*, 165.

Very much alive and supported by the Church, however, was the deep conviction of the obligation to bury the body and how important for salvation was a solemn funeral service.³⁴ The candles lit by the bed of a dying Christian played a very important role. They lit up the darkness in which the sins were buried and accompanied the angels in their fight against evil spirits for the soul of the dead. Later, burning candles were an important element of the funeral procession and symbolized the sky which, according to the hopes of the living, the dead were entering. This belief was confirmed by a fifteenth-century Polish preacher: "Those shall be condemned after whom candles will not be carried."³⁵ In honour of the deceased a meal was collectively consumed, in the belief that the soul of the deceased also participated in that meeting. It was reflected in the custom of throwing crumbs of food under the table for the deceased. Polish diocesan synodal statutes from the fifteenth century called on the clergy participating in funeral feasts (wakes) for restraint or totally prohibited participation in them.

Traditional beliefs prevailed in the period between the human death and moving of the soul into the unknown beyond. The burial of the body was seen as the end to the earthly human existence. People feared the possibility of the return of the dead to their homes shortly after the funeral. The belief in the possibility of their return to home not long after the funeral filled people with fear. Perhaps this fear stemmed from the archaic conviction about the consequences of failing to prepare an adequate funeral ceremony, which was combined with the concern for the well-being of the deceased in the afterlife. A preacher and theologian, Stanisław of Skarbimierz, condemned preventing the resurgence of the dead as superstitious. Among other things, he mentioned spilling ash before the threshold of the house of the dead and burying some objects of magical significance under the threshold.³⁶ He attributed these practices to women and men, the elderly and the young. The threshold of the house served as a boundary which separated the living from the dead, which was to prevent unwanted returns of the buried dead from the underworld.

There were also souls which showed no benevolence to people, however, not in a very dangerous manner but rather with a tendency to scare anyone surprised by seeing or hearing them. They came from ancient beliefs combined with the Christianized idea of the atonement for the sins unexpiated in the earthly life. Those sorrowful, repentant souls could stay in very different places: near the tomb, at the site of the sudden loss of life, under bridges, rocks, at crossroads, in caves, wells, forests, bushes, under the threshold and inside the home. The fear of the drowned was common. They were seen as evil and insidious and used to pull bathing people into whirlpools. The Church rejected the belief in the corporeal form of ghosts hostile towards people. It was critical of the idea of protection against this

34 Bylina 2009, 136–137.

35 Zaremska 1977, 139–140.

36 Chmielowska (ed.) 1979, *Stanisław ze Skarbimierza Sermones sapientiales*, 87.

or similar categories of the dead, at the same time criticizing the non-Christian ways of helping the visitors from the other world. The Christian belief in the immortality of souls combined with the long-standing belief in their circulation around the house, arrival on All Souls' Day, warming up by the fire and eating foods. The Church imposed prohibitions on human interference in matters relating to death: its prediction or indication through divinations about who was to pass away next. Some practices to guard against death were also recognized as superstitious; for example, the wearing of protective amulets.

In the Christian eschatology, the place where the immortal and incorporeal soul and those souls deprived of their earthly needs resided was connected with the places of reward and punishment after death. The funeral liturgical forms used in the initial phase of the Christianization of Poland included prayers for the salvation of the human soul and the lack of punishment by fire and other torments.³⁷ In the late Middle Ages, the concept of the soul was well-known in Polish lands. The faithful learned it from the liturgy, sermons and prayers. At the end of their lives, they devoted their souls to God and the Saints. The soul, however, was difficult to imagine. In the iconographic teaching, it was depicted as a small, vague (non-material) silhouette of a human shape, coming out of a dying man's mouth. It was also imagined as a small but distinctive figure lifted up to heaven by the angels. Preachers and writers of religious works claimed that the souls of the dead experienced joy and passion similarly to the living. In the mass imagination, the soul was somehow another body, similar to that which was buried in the ground.³⁸

All the actions taken by the living, in addition to grief, were motivated by their faith in the effectiveness of their gestures towards the dead. Church teaching promoted the belief that the living may reduce the suffering of the souls in purgatory by attending Holy Mass, saying prayers and performing good deeds. Crakow synodal statutes by bishops Nanker (Nankier, ep. 1320–1326) and Grotowic (Jan Grot, ep. 1326–1347) confirmed the observance of funeral eves. According to the synod of 1323, they were to be celebrated once a week in every parish. The dead were commemorated in breviary prayers. The office of the dead, the *officium defunctorum*, was a daily duty of the clergy. Fasting and alms also helped to relieve the souls in purgatory. The official liturgy of the Church set the prayers for the dead in the canon of the mass, the funeral service, funeral masses, and in the custom of *wypominki*, that is, reading the names of the deceased after every sermon. Reflection on death became a part of thinking about one's own fate.

37 Labudda 1983, 271–276.

38 Bylina 1992, 19.



Picture 3. This skull illustrates the office of the dead, the *officium defunctorum*, in the Gualenghi-d'Este Hours by Taddeo Crivelli (d. ca. 1479). The office begins with the words "*Placebo Domino*" (I will please the Lord).

Conclusion

The attitude of the Church towards the non-Christian manifestations of the ties between the world of the living and that of the deceased is characterized by a sort of ambiguity, sometimes difficult to recognize. There were prohibitions imposed when the content traced in popular practices was considered to be clearly discrepant from the Christian truths of faith. However, there was also tolerance for certain behaviours and rituals, especially those which were considered superstitious or pagan. In the fifteenth century, the warming of souls by the fire after they came back from the cold underworld was perceived by Polish preachers as "*ritus paganorum*", while leaving food for them was seen as "*erroneum*". The vigil by the deceased and mourning during the "empty evening" was described as "*consuetudo*". Therefore, cyclic practices were treated more severely (feeding and warming souls) than occasional ones which related to death and burial.

The circle of beliefs and ideas about the other world was an area in which religious syncretism was very clear even many centuries after the initial Christianization. The remaining fragments of the ancient Slavic conceptions of the afterlife, plucked from the once coherent systems, still coexisted with the assimilated threads of Christian teaching in the waning centuries of the Middle Ages. They were expressed in the efforts to secure well-being, supernatural care and integration with dead ancestors. The reflection on the nature of death was commemorative in character. It led human memory beyond the earthly horizon, became a kind of warning or encouragement which could not be forgotten in this life. The remembrance of the deceased was undoubtedly an element of thinking about oneself.

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