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SARMATISM AS EUROPE'S FOUNDING MYTH

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“More and more phenomena are assuming a political dimension, and the surrounding world of politics is beginning to overwhelm us. Despite its grounding in rationality, and despite efforts to adapt it to the changing forms of social life, it systematically yields to derealisation. The key notions in this area, such as liberty, equality, democracy, *raison d'état*, revolution, counter-revolution, are becoming increasingly disconnected, receive variegated explanations and interpretations in political practice, are readily subject to manipulation.”¹

Cultural myth expresses a collective, emotionally charged belief in the veracity of a conceptual content, a memory, and simultaneously provides a model, a set of rules for social behaviour. Leszek Kołakowski draws attention to the ubiquity of mythological thinking in contemporary culture in which it addresses the universal need to find meaning and continuity in the world and its values.² Myth is then a particular mode of perception, cognition, and understanding of reality, part of man's mentality, his national and cultural identity.

¹ T. Biernat, *Mit polityczny*, Warszawa 1989, pp. 10–11.

² Cf. L. Kołakowski, *Obecność mitu*, Wrocław 1994, passim.

European societies of the Renaissance demonstrated a wish to have their own myth of beginning (hence the emergence of France's Gallicanism, Scandinavia's Gothism and Nordism, Hungary's Scythism, and the Sarmatism in question) that would assert a long and glorious history of a nation, yet, on the other hand, they wanted integration, a sense of kinship.³ Those myths in general did not concern a particular country, but rather a nation, and by and large it was the society that ultimately determined whether a mythic thinking would continue or what form it would assume. Therefore, while enumerating the originary myths, I deliberately did not refer to Sarmatism as Poland-specific, for this conceptualisation of collective self extended well beyond the Polish nation. It was constituted by four meanings:

- geo-historical (sourced from chronicles recorded by historiographers and ancient cartographers)
- political (identifying Sarmatia, the mythical land from which the Sarmats came from, with the country under the Jagiellonians)
- ethnic-related (synonymous with 'Slavic' and 'Sarmatian')
- status-related (only the members of the *szlachta* or 'nobility'⁴ that descended from the earlier knighthood)

Historiographers, beginning with Jan Długosz, agreed to the origins of the Polish nobility, and by the end of the sixteenth century the Sarmatian mythological ideology took on a final shape. In the following two centuries, however, it underwent alterations, some elements were added, while other abandoned. This raises questions about the overall Sarmatian structure and its operation (but it is too complex subject to address it here). Researchers in the field seem to be at a loss even in pinpointing its central aspect (whether it was noble status, liberty, equality⁵, independence from foreign influence, or perhaps faith). One value effected another or other

³ Cf. T. Chrzanowski, *Sarmatyzm – mity dawne i współczesne*, [in:] idem, *Wędrowki po Sarmacji Europejskiej*, Kraków 1988, p. 7.

⁴ For the sake of clarity, because throughout my paper I refer to specific local conditions, in some cases I have decided to introduce at first the Polish term and its closest English equivalent.

⁵ A. Zajączkowski, *Główne elementy kultury szlacheckiej w Polsce. Ideologia a struktury społeczne*, Wrocław 1961, p. 56.

connections within a coherent philosophy of the nobility, and later of the Sarmats, thus formulated. Nonetheless, we can distinguish two principal ideas, liberty and equality, from which other world views, such as respect for tradition, patriotism (love of country), or the ideal of concord⁶, appear to have stemmed. Krzysztof Obremski divides a diagram that presents fundamental, in his opinion, elements making up the Sarmatian myth: noble status (*bene natus et possessionatus*), noble liberties, fraternal equality, bravery in battle, *antemurale* (bulwark of Christendom), political system (including the *pospolite ruszenie* or “levy in mass”, the *sejm* or “diet”, “assembly”, the *sejmik* or “dietine”, and the “free” election of kings), Christianity/Catholicism, Polishness, megalomania, and xenophobia.⁷

That they had been invoked very frequently attests the great bulk of Old Polish writing pertaining to the public space – especially texts of a political character – as well as the private, domestic space. But in the 17th century Sarmatism lost its fixity of meaning, which have led eventually to its distortion and conceptual crisis. In the course of time it went through markedly daring modifications, or rather ideological machinations that rendered it suitable to political circumstances. The employment of legend not only served the internal policy but also exerted a profound impact on decision-making in the “First” *Rzeczpospolita* with respect to external affairs. Sarmatian roots furnished an excuse for some of the morally dubious moves, and virtues associated with them turned out a calculated exercise. The seventeenth-century interventions in a bid for the Russian throne during the Polish-Muscovite wars blatantly exemplify this point. The Enlightenment critics were proved right in emphasising the propagandist effectiveness of Sarmatism as a foreign and domestic policy tool. The political system, though ossified and removed from reality (while in Europe absolutism gained momentum, the *Rzeczpospolita* had its noble democracy, or to be exact, the levy in mass and the *liberum veto*), could not be reformed because the nobility believed in its ancestral superiority and regarded tradition as a sacrosanct authority. To the noble legacy to be conferred upon

⁶ K. Opaliński, *Kultura polityczna szlachty polskiej w latach 1587–1652, System parlamentarny a społeczeństwo obywatelskie*, Warszawa 1995, p. 80.

⁷ K. Obremski, *Psalmodya polska. Trzy studia nad poematem*, Toruń 1995, p. 120.

the future generations belonged primarily the rights to hold “free” elections and diet and dietine sessions as well as use the *liberum veto* power. The major cause of conservatism lied precisely in the absolutisation of noble privileges. Soon the Roman-Catholic faith was also fashioned into a political weapon since the nobility considered the *Rzeczpospolita* as the bulwark of Christendom. The nobility wanted to protect Europe against Islamisation, yet held special appeal for the art of the Orient and borrowed from it amply. But at the same time they felt that the efforts put into defending the mother country deserved special recognition, irrespective of the already accumulated benefits; hence, their megalomaniacal attitude, presumptions of grandeur and exceptionality, xenophobic hostility, contempt for otherness and anything that fell outside their identity structure.

The nobility forgot about the ideals of equality, liberty, and tolerance. Initially the Sarmatian myth produced favourable results – it welded together a multinational people of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. But, as it transpired, the harmonious facade disguised a struggle for power and economic opportunities, which led to a deep differentiation within the noble stratum (between the *magnateria* or “magnates” and the *szlachta zagrodowa*, impoverished noble smallholders) and dispelled the illusion of freedom. It was the former group that really made decisions about the fate of their brethren and ... the entire country.

With the Union of Lublin (1569) the Commonwealth of the Two Nations became an amalgam of Poles, Lithuanians, Ukrainians (Rusins) as well as Jewish communities. The formation of a consolidated state, one of the grandest and greatest of the Old Continent, nudged the *Rzeczpospolita* into a process of Europeanisation, even though it had renounced ties the West. Furthermore, the nobility still nurtured a feeling of superiority to the Turkish and Tartar ‘barbarians’ and classified themselves as European rather than Asian. Their highly developed national consciousness (sometimes too excessively) did not interfere with a sense of European belonging.

Once torn by divisions, Europe was given an opportunity to unite again. Is today’s European Union a most advanced form of governance or just another mythological fabrication, only now in a 21st century guise. Is it an original or just a copy?

The European Union is an outcome of over fifty years of muddling through. Admittedly, integrationist tendencies had manifested themselves on the Old Continent, but only in the 20th century they started to flourish at a rapid pace. The division of Europe into two spheres of influence deepened the existing political and economic differences between East and West. It was prosperity that caused the closer consolidation of West European states. Jean Monnet and subsequently Robert Schuman set forth the project for integration. In 1951 the Schuman Plan gave birth to the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) that coalesced the markets of France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. “[I]t became both a supranational institution and a body endowed with international legal personality. ... The Community was a move towards the creation of a European federation.”⁸ In 1957 the Treaties of Rome sealed the cooperation agreements by setting up the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM), which, together with the ECSC, since that moment has been referred to as European Communities. This instigated a gradual reduction of trade barriers among the membership states. It was not until the following decades that the changes acquired a political orientation.

The Maastricht Treaty on European Union (1993) marked a significant step forward since the end of WWII. Currently, we are witnessing other aspects of social life – agriculture, ecology, security, foreign policy, institutions, commerce, currency etc – being subject to EU regulations.⁹

The present-day common Europe has grown in a top-down pattern by the power of the arrangements and treaties signed by West European countries in the Cold War era. It was only long after the 1989 Autumn of Nations that the inhabitants of the former Eastern bloc could finally dream of European integration. To the new generation it seems fairly obvious that you can venture anytime and anywhere, or that when travelling west, you are treated (at least according to official pronouncements) on equal footing with Europeans, as the Westerners were called in the time of the

⁸ W. Gizicki, *Globalizacja – podzielony świat, zjednoczona Europa?*, [in:] *Jedność i różnorodność – wyzwanie globalizacji*, R. Stefański (ed.), Toruń–Kielce 2008, p. 190.

⁹ See T. Grabowski, *Unia Europejska – mechanizmy integracji gospodarczej*, Toruń 2008, *passim*.

Polish People's Republic. The elderly Poles still harbour memories about Poland's past.

A desire to be European, transnational is not a fancy of Poles of the post-war generation. Before its inception, the European Union had its predecessors, often in the form of myth. Greek mythology, a deep well of cultural resources for Europeans to draw from, tells the story of the abduction of Europa, the daughter of the Phoenician King Agenor. Her beauty attracted the amorous eye of Zeus, the ruler of the Olympian gods, who disguised as a white bull with golden horns carried her off to Crete, where she bore him Sarpedon, Radamanthis, and Minos, the ancestors of contemporary Europeans.¹⁰

"[I]ntegration is a multistage, multifaceted, evolutionary process of mutual convergence and coordination leading to an advanced or complete unification". The notion of European integration "refers to both a process of emergence of a community of people sharing a similar cultural heritage, and a process of economic and political cooperation, of establishment of a network of international and supranational institutions and organisations".¹¹

"Specifying the notion of the European Union poses a difficulty. It can be understood as a suprainstitutional, supranational integration mechanism based on dynamic, close unification".¹² All the integrationist processes aim at bringing a maximum benefit for the whole continent as well as individual countries.¹³ Likewise, Sarmatism was a political ideology of the nobility who, having asserted control, would not allow to have it taken away.

"European integration is thus an attempt at responding to the challenges and problems of a global scale, crises in finance, raw materials, energy, and the security sector. Although the integrating Europe does not constitute an ideal unity, but rather a unity in diversity, it shows essential

¹⁰ Cf. *Europa*, [keyword in:] W. Kopaliński, *Słownik mitów i tradycji kultury*, Warszawa 1985, p. 265; J. Chałasiński, *Historyczne pojęcie Europy*, [in:] *Kultura i naród. Studia i szkice*, Warszawa 1968, p. 168; M. Dobroczyński, J. Stefanowicz, *Tożsamość Europy*, Warszawa 1979, p. 8.

¹¹ J.M. Fiszer, *Unia Europejska a polska – dziś i jutro*, Toruń 2002, pp. 21, 22.

¹² J. Ruskowski, *Unia Europejska*, [keyword in:] *idem*, E. Górnicz, M. Żurek, *Leksykon integracji europejskiej*, edition IV, Warszawa 2004, p. 448.

¹³ Cf. W. Gizicki, *op.cit.*, p. 189.

elements characteristic of an integrated superpower. In an economic and ideological sense, we deal here with an awareness of the significance of unification".¹⁴

Determining the (non)existence of a collective European value system appears particularly troublesome for scholars.¹⁵ Ralph Linton proposes a view of culture as a society's way of life because the individual's reaction to a given situation results not simply from his personalised traits, but even more from social practice and experience. Władysław Tatarkiewicz provides another perspective. He divides the achievements of mankind into civilisation and culture, defining the latter as "experiences and activities of the individuals who have produced civilisation and who use civilisation".¹⁶ Tatarkiewicz expands the concept to include the political system, law and morality, religion, knowledge, aesthetic taste, and ideology.

Anthony D. Smith takes a different stance. He argues that national identity "involves some sense of political community, however tenuous. A political community in turn implies at least some common institutions and a single code of rights and duties for all the members of the community. It also suggests a definite social space, a fairly well demarcated and bounded territory, with which the members identify and to which they feel they belong".¹⁷ Smith focuses here not particularly on an identification with a nation or its culture, but more on the relationship that binds the individual to institutions and socio-geographic space. However, in his further reflections he emphasises the importance of national heritage – myths, symbols, values, and memories – in facilitating identity formation; thus he points out to the function of cultural content as an object of cognition.¹⁸ All in all, Smith sees national identity as resting on a sense of

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 191.

¹⁵ Cf. R. Stefański, *System (?!) zasad i wartości europejskich*, [in:] *Europa homogeniczna czy komplementarna – recepta na zjednoczenie*, R. Stefański, A. Zamojski (eds.), Toruń–Kielce 2009, p. 133–142; A. Chodubski, *Rezonans tradycji w rozwoju kultury europejskiej*, [in:] *Polska w Unii Europejskiej. Bilans otwarcia*, J. Marszałek-Kawa (ed.), Toruń 2005, pp. 7–25.

¹⁶ Quotation after: J. Gajda, *Antropologia kulturowa. Część I*, Toruń 2005, p. 12.

¹⁷ A.D. Smith, *National Identity*, Londyn 1991, p. 9.

¹⁸ *Idem*, *Nacjonalizm. Teoria, ideologia, historia*, Warszawa 2007, pp. 31–35.

political community with institutions and achieved through an emotional bond with the totality of culture.

The need of identification exists among all human beings. Belonging to a collectivity it allows us to transcend own limitations and imperfection, to participate in the achievements of the society and to cultivate its heritage.¹⁹

Antonina Kłosowska puts forward an interesting thesis which highlights the emotional aspect of national identity, springing from a synthesis of values, ideas, symbols, stereotypes, and myths constructing national culture. A permanent place in the collective consciousness allows it to perform the role of an element that integrates, forges and maintains bonds. In Kłosowska's opinion, national identity is especially invoked in times of danger, whether cultural or biological, when it provides a basis for the operations of an integrated society.²⁰

Maria E. Szatlach expresses reservations about European identity. Asking about the essence of Europeanism, she demonstrates that from a geographical standpoint, and even more so from a cultural one, the answer is not without ambiguity. Szatlach claims that there has not yet emerged a bidirectional identity, national and European at the same time, because the creation of a common, homogenous culture is too impossible task to fulfil for the European Union.²¹ In turn Robert Szwed thinks that one of the possible paths for the European Union to follow is the construction of an identity superior to the national one, which will go beyond institutional boundaries, yet brings the Continental countries together. In addition, Szwed gives weight to the idea of community of goals, which the European Union undeniably embodies through collective identity building. Another likely scenario involves the transformation of national identities into a new, all-encompassing idea of Europeanism, taken as a sign of pan-European nationalism – Szwed alludes to A.D. Smith, who discusses a new type of

¹⁹ K. Krzysztofek, A. Sadowski, *Wstęp*, [in:] *Obywatelstwo i tożsamość w społeczeństwach zróżnicowanych kulturowo i na pograniczach*, Tom I, M. Bieńkowska-Ptasznik, K. Krzysztofek, A. Sadowski (eds.), Białystok 2006, p. 13.

²⁰ A. Kłosowska, *Kultury narodowe u korzeni*, Warszawa 2005, pp. 85–99.

²¹ Cf. M.E. Szatlach, *European Identity and Populism*, „Polish Political Science. Yearbook” 2007, pp. 73–78.

collective identity that may define Europeanism, and Jürgen Habermas, who writes about the concept of postmodern, postnational citizenship.²²

“Medieval Europe, as a community of nations, thrived by drawing its strength from the legacy of Greek and Roman civilisations, and Christianity enriched it with the experience of sacrum.²³ Such a conceptualisation of Europe challenged geographical limits, and in a like manner the Old Continent constructively influences today both Americas as well as northern and southern Africa. European expansion that prevailed until the outbreak of WW I made the history of Europe practically indistinguishable from that of the world.²⁴ This pushes the integrationist processes within the Euro-Atlantic area into the spotlight. Europeanism, as John Paul II used to say, ‘cannot be reduced to the question of the boundaries of Europe’²⁵; it is a quality that has developed over centuries and that spreads beyond the geographical area of the Old Continent”²⁶

Perhaps this explains the fascinating phenomenon of European cultural tradition – that it is diverse in its unity? Europeans preserve and foster a consciousness of common roots – the Greek culture, Roman law and Christian faith – a shared civilisation so distinct from others, particularly in terms of the continuity of features the originality of which allows to speak of European culture.²⁷ Those three key elements created once Sarmatism (ancient chronicles and charts, the political system of the *Rzeczpospolita* of Poland-Lithuania modelled on the Roman Republic, Roman-Catholic faith), and now they make the citizens of France, Germany, Italy, or Poland, feel European. We are bound by cultural identity, yet divided by a national one.

²² R. Szwed, *Modele tożsamości europejskiej a identyfikacje zbiorowe w Europie*, [in:] *Wokół tożsamości: teorie, wymiary, ekspresje*, I. Borowik, K. Leszczyńska (eds.), Kraków 2007, p. 167.

²³ See O. Halecki, *Historia Europy – jej granice i podziały*, Lublin 1994; *Europa jako pojęcie filozoficzne*, R. Buttiglione, J. Merecki (eds.), Lublin 1995; *Chrześcijaństwo a jedność Europy*, E. Cyran, A. Czaja, P. Gutowski (eds.), Lublin 2006.

²⁴ W. Wallace, *The Transformation of Western Europe*, Londyn 1990, p. 13.

²⁵ Quotation after: *Europa drogą Kościoła. Jan Paweł II o Europie i europejskości*, S. Sowiński, R. Zenderowski (eds.), Wrocław 2003, p. 20.

²⁶ W. Gizicki, *op.cit.*, p. 189.

²⁷ M. Dobroczyński, J. Stefanowicz, *Tożsamość Europy*, Warszawa 1979, p. 149.