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The topos of the ages of the world and man in the first sermon on *Dominica Septuagesimae* of Mikołaj of Błonie[1]

Abstract

This article aims to investigate how Mikołaj of Błonie, a Polish preacher from the first half of the fifteenth century, employs the motif of the ages of the world and man in the first sermon on *Dominica Septuagesimae* from his collection *de tempore*. In order to determine its function in respect to the medieval text and its role in religious instruction, this study identifies the sources of this theme and how it was adapted by the preacher according to the requirements of the sermon genre. A comprehensive analysis of Mikołaj of Błonie's sermon demonstrates that the preacher employs the topos of the ages of the world and man as a persuasive literary device carrying a powerful, charismatic exhortation, in line with the didactic and moralizing nature of the sermon as a rhetorical genre. I will argue that the preacher exerted meticulous care in selecting and adapting source materials to make it relevant and appealing to his audience.

Keywords

medieval preaching, Polish medieval literature, medieval sermon, the ages of the world, medieval conception of time

Introduction

This paper aims to be a contribution to studies of the role of the topoi in fifteenth-century literary communication by examining their use in sermons, and specifically, on how they have been processed and actualized in function of their rhetorical potential in preaching. This study focuses on the topos of the ages of man and the world as it appears in the sermon of Mikołaj of Błonie, a Polish preacher living in the first half of the fifteenth century, in order to determine its function within medieval text and its role in religious education. In particular, it analyzes how Mikołaj of Błonie employs the prevalent motif of the ages of man and the world in the first sermon on *Dominica Septuagesimae* from his collection *de tempore.* In addition, it will investigate the sources of this motif and how it was processed to conform to the requirements of the sermon genre.

The topos of the ages of man and the world was selected for analysis due to its subsequent influence on medieval Christian literature. Over the centuries, this motif has undergone numerous transformations and changes in medieval literature and art (Luneau 1964; Sears 1985; Burrow 1986; García 2012). Depending on the purpose and the user, it has received different interpretations. Employing this topos in sermons is particularly interesting as it enables preachers to achieve different effects, depending on the context, while remaining focused on the rhetorical function of *movere,* which aims to move the recipients and inspire them to change their life. The meaning of this topos in medieval literature is manifold; the ancient Graeco-Roman pessimistic theory of world cycles as a gradual degeneration after the Golden Age was supplanted by a new Christian perspective – a planned *ordo temporum* – with the chief events detailed in the Bible. It was a popular way of presenting the history of the world in medieval sermons, and it was often used to emphasize the importance of living a virtuous life in preparation for the final judgment. This approach illustrated the continuity of God's plan throughout history and emphasized the central role of Christ in humanity's salvation. Additionally, it reflected a medieval profound interest in history and historical writing, providing a way of conceptualizing Christian historical periodization.

The present article adopts a methodological approach grounded in the theory of intertextuality and topoi. Ernst Robert Curtius pointed out that topoi are related to the sphere of rhetoric and intertextuality (Curtius 2013: 70). In sermons, the *ars inveniendi* (the art of invention) involves a skillful selection of a topic, defining its framework, and finding appropriate examples and arguments. The key to successful rhetorical invention lies in the conscious and artistic use of topoi (Caplan 1927: 287). Curtius emphasized that topoi serve as aids toward composing orations within the system of ancient rhetoric, where a topic could be treated as an "omnibus" containing various ideas used in arranging writings or speeches (Curtius 2013: 70). Paul Zumthor provided a broader definition of topoi, describing them as imaginative themes or motifs that determine the choice of a specific thought or image to illustrate a described situation (Zumthor 1975: 100-101). Heinrich Lausberg presented the most general definition of topoi, stating that *loci* are search formulas, and in their generality, they are a repository of ideas from which suitable ideas are extracted (Lausberg 1990: § 374). The key to this approach is the interaction between rhetorical invention

and topos that can be observed in medieval sermons. In the repository of topoi, the preacher searches for what is appropriate for a given topic in the process of invention. Therefore, rewriting topoi enables a dialogue between the past and present, and is a form of literary creativity that collects old ideas, mixes them with author's own commentary, and creates new qualities.

This study undertakes an analysis of the topos of the ages of man and the world in Mikołaj of Błonie's sermon by tracing the motif's sources as used in the sermon. The aim is to demonstrate the usage of this motif in medieval literature, with particular emphasis on preaching, and to investigate how Mikołaj of Błonie's sermon compares with other works in this context. Furthermore, the aim is to examine the modifications made by Mikołaj to the topos and explore the purpose behind these changes. The primary questions addressed in this article are: how and why did Mikołaj of Błonie use the topos of the ages of man and the world in his text for the laity and lower-level clergy? What were the sources that Mikołaj used? How does his presentation of this topos differ from that of other medieval authors? In answering these questions, first a brief overview of Mikołaj's biography will be provided, followed by an examination of how the topos of the ages of man and the world was presented in the medieval exegetical tradition. Subsequently, Mikołaj's sermon will be analysed, drawing on its sources. The topos as a component of rhetorical persuasion, exegetical strategies for reading the Bible, and medieval pastoral care will be crucial aspects of the analysis. It will emphasize the significance of the rhetorical selection of motif variants and the need to justify this choice in relation to the effectiveness of the genre, which in this case is the sermon.

Mikołaj of Błonie and his works

Mikołaj of Błonie[1], known as Pszczółka, ("The Bee") (ca. 1400–bef 1448), was a doctor of canon law at the University of Krakow. He is best known for his two collections of sermons (*de tempore* and *de sanctis*) and a pastoral treatise entitled *Tractatus sacerdotalis de sacramentis* (Zahajkiewicz 1979: 10-32; Grzybowska 2020: 79-80, 476). Mikołaj's broad approach to problems related to ministration (such as sacraments, Holy Mass, prayers, canonical hours, etc.) paired with a clear style and excellent grasp of literature of canon law made of *Tractatus sacerdotalis* one of the most famous works of the Late Middle Ages written by a Polish author.

Mikołaj hailed from Błonie, a small town in Mazovia and was the son of a townsman, Falisław. He was born before 1400, in 1414 he enrolled at the University of Krakow, where he obtained a baccalaureate (1415) and a master's degree (1421) in the liberal arts, and then, in 1427, a doctorate in canon law. From 1422 to 1427, Mikołaj held the dignity of the royal chaplain and likely served as queen Sophia's preacher (Wolny 1975: 219). He was also an employee of the royal

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[1] In handwritten sources, he most often appears as Nicholaus de Blone / Blonye or Nicholaus Blony, while in catalogs and old prints, we find his works mainly under the names: Nicholaus de Blovie, Nicholaus de Staravolcio de Blonie, Nicholaus de Polonia, Nicholaus Plovius, Nicholaus Plonius, Nicholaus Pluveus, Nicholaus Polonus, Nicholaus de Plowe, or de Plone.

office, helping notaries, which brought him closer to Stanisław Ciołek, the royal vice-chancellor. In 1428, Ciołek was elected and consecrated bishop of Poznań. Mikołaj accompanied Ciołek to Poznań, where he became the chaplain of the new bishop and probably preached in Poznań cathedral. After Ciołek's death on November 10, 1437, Mikołaj returned to his homeland, Mazovia, where he held several prebends. He attended various functions there, including parish priest in Czersk (since 1430), cathedral canon in Płock, and canon in Warsaw. From 1439 to 1441, he was also an official based at the collegiate church of St. John in Warsaw. There are also testimonies of his work in the chancellery of Masovian dukes and the land chancellery. He died before 1448 (Ulanowski 1888).

Mikołaj's collections consist of typical *sermones moderni,* which are scholastic sermons that focus on specific themes from the Bible, particularly from the New Testament. The *sermo modernus* is divided into parts (usually three) and consists of interpreting Scripture in four senses: historical, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical. Mikołaj's sermons mention contemporary social phenomena such as the Hussite movement, economic difficulties, family and social relationships, and elements of the education system. In the opening sermon, the preacher's primary objective is to provide "milk for the children in Christ, not the nourishment for the educated people"[2]. It is a kind of programme statement for the Polish preacher, who declares that every word he writes should be regarded as an instruction and a moral formation for the uneducated laity.

The topos of ages of man and the world

The topos of the ages of man and the world can be found in many medieval treatises, sermons, and other texts. It is based upon Christian religious events, from the creation of Adam to the Final Judgement and the End Times. The topos of the ages of man and the image of the six stages of human life also have their roots in Greco-Roman antiquity. Authors such as Empedocles or Seneca drew attention to the three divisions of human life, while Pythagoras, Hesiod, and Xenophon – into four, Hippocrates spoke of seven stages, and Solon – ten (Archambault 1966: 194). This division was superimposed on a parallel one concerning the history of the world. Hesiod recalled the five successive ages (Archambault 1966: 194). Cicero, Lucretius, and Virgil had a similar approach (Archambault 1966: 195), but a more detailed description appears in Lucius Annaeus Florus, who compares the stages of Rome's history to the stages of human life (Archambault 1966: 196-197). This metaphor, present in the Greco-Roman world, was later creatively used by early Christian writers. The Old Testament divided the six days of creation, while the history of salvation was divided into – mostly five – generations (Adam to Noah; Noah to Abraham; Abraham to David; David to the Babylonian captivity; the Babylonian captivity to Christ) (Archambault 1966: 201). All this was combined with the symbolism of numbers and parables from the New Testament (six vases in Cana of Galilee or five hours of work of Workers at the Vineyards).

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[2] Here, and further on, unless otherwise stated, the translation is by the author of the article. "Lac dare in potum parvulis in Christo, non escam provectis intendit", (Nicholaus 1498: Av).

In medieval texts, the division into the stages of human life and/or of the world was neither obvious nor permanent, and, depending on the authors, it was presented differently. For example, Ambrose, referring to Hippocrates and the *De opificio mundi* of Philo of Alexandria (Philo, 1981: 82-87), speaks of seven periods of his life (*infantia, pueritia, adulescentia, iuventus, virilis aetas, maturitas, senectus*) (Ambrosius 1988: 306-308), while in another place he quotes only four (Ambrosius *De Abraham II* 9, 65, PL 14, col. 487). Not only did St. Augustine write about six ages (see also Augustinus PL 34: 121-172) but also Isidor of Seville (Isidorus PL 82: 415). Irenaeus of Lyon spoke of five stages (Irenaeus 2, 24.4)[3]. This motif has also been used in historical works, e.g., *Chronicon in aetates sex divisum* by Ado of Vienne (Adonis Viennensis, PL 123 col. 23A-138B) and other treatises (*Divinae institutiones* by Lactantius, *De imagine mundi* by Honorius of Autun) divide the history of the world into the six traditional ages (Archambault 1966: 209). As Elizabeth Sears stated, many compendia preferred the exegesis of six (for example, *Liber de natura rerum* by Thomas of Cantimpré[4]) or seven ages of man (i.e., *Reductorium morale* by Peter Berchorius) (Sears 1985: 126-129). The topos was very popular, serving different purposes depending on the genre and was also an inspiration for subsequent topoi (Burrow 1986). Undoubtedly, the theme of the aging of the world (*mundus senescit*), present, e.g., in the *Carmina Burana,* stems from this motif.

The Sermon on *Dominica Septuagesimae* of Mikołaj of Błonie – a brief summary

The first sermon on Septuagesima Sunday on the theme "For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a householder" (*Simile est regnum coelorum homini patrifamilias,* Mt 20, 1) from the collection *de tempore* by Mikołaj of Błonie is a simple, didactic lecture on eschatological issues and God's justice and mercy. It consists of three parts. In the introduction (*introductio thematis*), the preacher speaks about Septuagesima, the time of preparation for the season of Lent. Mikołaj explains that the *Alleluia* ceases to be sung during the mass because in this part of the liturgical year joyful church singing cannot be performed. The Gospel for Septuagesima Sunday is the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16), therefore, the basis of the sermon is precisely the theme taken from this pericope. In the following parts of the sermon, Mikołaj presents the allegorical interpretation of the parable. His interpretative strategy is deeply embedded in the tradition of reading this pericope.

In his allegorical analysis, Mikołaj explains that the workers in the vineyard represent believers, the landowner represents God, the work in the vineyard represents good deeds, and the final payment represents eternal life. Mikołaj employs a well-known topos related to the reading of this fragment of the

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[3] More about these enumerations cf. Naumowicz 2011: 249-253; Sears, 1985: 80-81.

[4] In Poland, the popularity of works by Thomas of Cantimpré, known, among others, in the Low Countries, was limited. Manuscripts of *De naturis rerum* are found in: Jagiellonian Library, Kraków, Ms. 794, 795 III, Wrocław University Library, Ms. 174.

Gospel as an allegory of the ages of mankind. He demonstrates a division into biblical generations, which he adjusts to the five-time intervals in which workers came to work (one, three, six, nine, and eleven o'clock), and then points out that the hours represented in the parable are also an allegory of human life. The main authorities mentioned in the sermon are Augustine, John Chrysostom, Venerable Bede, Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose, Gregory the Great, Hugh of St. Victor, and Nicholas Gorran. The sermon explores typical themes of allegoresis, including the question of God's grace, the question of whether those who have never heard the teachings of Christ can be saved, the envy and murmuring of early workers in whom Mikołaj, like many other exegetists, sees Jews, and the question of late conversion. These are issues that, to a greater or lesser extent, appear in many interpretations of this parable.

Stephen L. Wailes, in his fundamental study on the interpretation of the parable of Jesus in medieval texts, analyzed the works of nearly 40 patristic and medieval authors writing on the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. He pointed out that the core of the interpretation had been shaped by Origen, who presented two interpretative paths. The first interpretation of the day of the laborers is presented as a history of the world, with specified hours marking the principal divisions of mankind's spiritual history. The second interpretation likens the day to an individual's life, its phases of growth and decline designated by the intervals (Wailes 1987: 138-139). The framework of this exegesis was stable and used frequently during medieval times, however, considerable discussion is shown in detail in comments and interpretations (Wailes 1987: 139). In his sermon, Mikołaj combines these two interpretations, pointing to both the perception of world history and the particular history of a man.

Exegesis of the parable of the Workers at the Vineyard in other Late-medieval sermons

It should be said that the Gospel story about Workers in the Vineyard did not have to immediately involve the use of the topos of ages of man and/or the world. There were quite a few interpretative strategies for this parable (Tevel, 1992: 356-380). For example, one of the most popular preachers of the Late Middle Ages, Dominican friar Johannes Herolt, (ca. 1380-1468) in sermon 32 of his *Sermones discipuli,* uses pericope's exegesis, applying topos *aetates mundi* (f1v), but builds his argumentation differently, focusing on the creation of men and on reasons for which the time of the Septuagesima is sacred (Herolt 1485: f. f1v). Another famous Dominican preacher, Vincentius Ferrerius (ca. 1350-1419), selects a different theme from the pericope, namely *Multi sunt vocati, pauci vero electi* (Mt 20). Already in the first part of the sermon, he writes about the division of five hours from the evangelical parable into five stages of human life (Ferrerius 1493-1494: f. l6r). Lucas de Magna Cosmin (ca. 1370- after June 1412), an excellent Polish preacher and rector of the University of Krakow, in his sermon on the subject *Simile est regnum...* does not focus on the exegesis of this fragment related to the issue of hours standing for the division into *aetates mundi* but instead draws attention to the matter of the heavenly homeland, and thus directs his argument to eschatological questions (Lucas f. 42v-44v).

Jacob of Juterbogk (Jacobus de Paradiso, Jacobus de Clusa, ca. 1380-1464), an outstanding theologian and promoter of the conciliarist idea, in his sermon for the Septuagesima Sunday, as early as in the introduction speaks of the six days of the creation of the world. Like Mikołaj of Błonie, he links this topos with biblical generations, referring to Gregory the Great (Jacobus de Paradiso 1475: f. d2v-d5v). The Franciscan monk, Michael de Hungaria (ca. 1450-1500), in considering why Christ came into the world at a certain historical moment, presented in his sermon (*Sermo universalis* IV) the topos of six ages of mankind, although he omitted here the pericope about Workers in the Vineyard (Michael de Hungaria 1621: 52). The English preacher from the fourteenth century, Thomas Wimbledon, used this parable to teach about the social hierarchy – priests, rulers, and laborers (Gane 1982: 196).

As we can see, the parable was explained in various ways, most often as an interpretation of God's mercy and a declaration that it is never too late to convert. Christine Cooper-Rompato examined a number of medieval English sermons and found that, in those sermons, we deal with many types of numerological division of the ages of man dependent on the pericope being read. For instance, the preacher's explanations of the fragment Mt 21: 1-9 could take into account the division into three, four, and five ages of man. The sermons for the Second Sunday after Trinity show four ages of the World, and sermons on the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Mt 20, 1, Septuagesima Sunday) – five ages of man, five ages of the world, or five ages of man and the world. Sermons for the Second Sunday after the Octave of Epiphany (John 2, 1-11, the six vessels in the story of the Miracle of Cana) use the topos of the six ages of man and the world (Cooper-Rompato 2021). Thus, Mikołaj of Błonie had a very wide range of possibilities and choices at the stage of *inventio.* Therefore, he had to make a double selection – to choose the right fragment of the pericope and to choose the way of interpreting it. Elizabeth Sears argues that later medieval encyclopedists showed "a growing preference for the seven-part division of life", caused by the correlation between the ages and the planets, and the canonical hours (Sears 1985: 133). However, many sermons do not show this preference expounded by the encyclopedists and Mikołaj's sermons as analyzed herein do not confirm it either. In Mikołaj's sermon, we are dealing with a division into five ages of humanity, on the one hand, due to the selected parable, and on the other hand, due to the issues linking the history of humanity with catechetical teaching.

Sources of Mikołaj's sermon and their rewriting

In this small and selective review of how late medieval preachers interpreted the pericope about Workers in the Vineyard, we can also see that the topos of the ages of mankind was not always related to the parable. The interpretative core of the topic often converges, and the differences can be seen in the details. What do these details depend on? To answer this question, we have to examine how Mikołaj of Błonie presented the topos of the ages of the world, what sources he used to describe this motif, what changes he introduced, and what were the functions of this motif in his sermon. Mikołaj uses specific sources in

presenting the interpretation of the evangelical parable in the context of the motif of the ages of humanity and of man, but his interpretation is of a different nature which is related to many aspects, especially the genre difference (sermon) and what forces this genre when employing specific topoi.

e. Augustine and Bede

The basis for the presentation of the theme of the ages of the world and of mankind for Mikołaj were several Christian sources, especially works by St. Augustine and Venerable Bede. In Book I, chapter 23 of *De Genesi contra Manichaeos,* St. Augustine discusses the seven days of Creation and seven periods of the world and the stages of human life, explaining why the rest belongs to the seventh day (Augustinus PL 34, col. 190-193). Bede, in *De temporum ratione* (725 A.C.), repeats Augustine's findings and interpretations, supplementing them with calculations of the years of the world, which he controls with the text of the Vulgate and the Septuagint (Bede 1999: 157-158). During the infancy of the world, almost all creatures were exterminated by the Flood, just like the memories of the first years of human life are erased: it is a period of life that one does not remember. The following age is childhood, and Bede considers it alongside the development of speech. The subsequent period – adolescence – was the time when the Hebrew language was invented. It was the moment when humanity achieved an excellent tool for expressing its thoughts. The adolescence of the world comes when fertility appears. The period of youth is the time of the emergence of the first royal powers. It is also the time that can be identified with manhood – the relationship of this age can be seen with the capability of wielding authority. Maturity is associated with the growth of the human race and with evil deeds, and senility – lasting until the present day – is the age leading to death.

Mikołaj strengthens the connection between the ages of the world and the stages of human life mainly drawn from Augustine and Bede (either from their original works or by mediation of some *florilegium*) by adding some interesting remarks, and interprets them differently from his predecessors:

> Therefore, the first period of life is infancy in a state of innocence. And the age of infancy is rightly compared to the first centuries of the world. Just as there was a flood, also in infancy a man immerses himself in oblivion, because this age would rapidly turn to evil. The third hour is childhood. As in that third period the Hebrew language was invented, so in adolescence one acquires the skill of careful speech. The sixth is youth, it encompasses manhood, and just as it is the first election of a king, so there are people in it to rule themselves and others. Hence, it is rightly resolved that no one should be promoted to the priesthood until he is twenty-five years old, and to bishopric, before he turns thirty which is the age of youth and bravery. The ninth hour is old age. Just as in this age the people of Israel, under the leadership of Moses, often experienced evil, so an old man often experiences

various disadvantages, as Cicero says in *De senectute.* The eleventh hour is the age of senility in which work and pain abound.[5]

He points out that childhood is the time when the innocence of a child begins to decline, and old age is a period full of bitterness and sorrow. Mikołaj refers here to Cicero and his *Cato Maior de senectute,* a well-known work on senility, discussed in medieval schools[6]. The period of life, as the preacher probably wants to suggest, of most of the readers and listeners of his sermon, is associated with the end of life (the needle points to 11 o'clock), during which people are ground down by work and pain. The reference to Cicero when dividing the stages of human life is already present in Tertullian's work, so Mikołaj had a long history of readings of this fragment of Cicero's treatise, which originally referred to the Iron Age, while in the Christianity it was meant as a waiting for the *parousia* and calling for conversion. In the quoted fragment of the sermon, the pessimistic interpretation of decline can be seen, but it is then functionalized and will serve didactic and moralizing purposes – to point out that the time is filling up and convertion is becoming urgent.

The preacher also draws attention to the age at which one may become a clergyman (having turned 25), and a bishop (having turned 30). In his treatise on sacraments, Mikołaj also addresses issues related to the priesthood and precisely defines the age a man must reach in order to become a clergyman (Nicholas de Plove 1560: 206). In the *Sacramentale,* Mikołaj indicates the circumstances of ordination, prerogatives and duties of various ranks of the priesthood. Both Bede and Augustine speak of manhood as the moment when a man may lead public service or ascend the throne. In Mikołaj's sermons, the information about the age at which one could become a priest or deacon has a different purpose. Mikołaj, referring to specific arrangements regarding the priesthood and bishopric puts the highest secular and spiritual ministry on an equal footing, pointing out that the same skills which are acquired with age, are needed to perform these functions. The preacher, however, does not develop this theme in the sermon, presenting it more broadly in the pastoral treatise, for a sermon has a different function from a treatise and has a wider and more diverse range of recipients, including laity. Therefore, the elements related to canon law and the church hierarchy that appear in Mikołaj's sermons are only hinted at. Mikołaj's

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[5] "Vnde in prima etate uocantur pueri in statu innocentie. Et bene pueritia comparantur prime etati mundi. Sicut enim in illa fuit diluuium, ita in puericia fit submersio per obliuionem, eo quod illa etas valde prona est ad malum. (...) Tertia hora est adolescentia. Sicut enim in illa tertia etate fuit inuenta lingua hebraica. Sic in adolescentia homo incipit perfecte loqui. Sexta est iuuentus, et ista includit virilitatem. Et sicut in illa fuit prima regum election. Sic in ista apti sunt homines ad regendum se et alios. Vnde statutum est vt nullus promoueatur in sacerdotium nisi in vicesimo quinto anno. Et in episcopum non nisi in tricesimo, que est etas iuuenilis et virilis. Nona est senectus. Sicut enim in illa etate plebs Hebreorum fuit crebris malis quassata sub Moyse. Ita senes multis afficiuntur incommodis vt dicit Tullius in libro *de senectute.* Vndecima autem hora est decrepitus in qua est amplius labor et dolor." (Nicholaus 1498: n8r– n8v).

[6] Cicero, *De senectute,* 23, 84: "Quid habet enim vita commodi? Quid non potius laboris?". Cf. Horace, *Ars poetica,* 169: "multa senem circumveniunt incommoda". See Coffman 1934: 249-277; Ruys 2007: 171-200.

sermons functioned as a supplement to the treatise, and their first recipient were priests who used both collections to improve their knowledge and skills to deliver sermons. His collections were useful for clergy as a help to the construction of their own sermons.

Augustine and Bede, writing about the topos, had different goals; for Augustine, it had the character of the philosophy of history, while for Bede it was a matter of interpreting the computing theory of time. In Mikołaj's sermon, there is a significant change at this point; he no longer speaks of secular rulers but refers to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Mikołaj harnesses this topos for purely utilitarian, didactic purposes. In this way, he teaches not only the laity but above all the lower clergy, who are also among the assumed recipients of his sermon. On that account, it is not surprising that Mikołaj's numerous references to typically pastoral issues are present in the collections of sermons. On the one hand, it is an explanation for the faithful, who, thanks to it, have updated information on the current situation, and on the other hand, the reference to the issue of church organization shows the clergy the deep meaning of their mission, inscribed in God's plan of history.

f. Nicholas Gorran

Mikołaj uses the interpretation presented in the works of Augustine and Bede, but he does so in a selective manner, in accordance with the adopted interpretative and exegetical strategy, imposed by the sermon genre, and summarized in the category of *utilitas,* i.e., maximum functionalization of the authorities used in the texts. He chooses five stages of human life, not six or seven as in the texts of Augustine and Bede, because he refers not only to the topos of *aetates mundi* and its relation to the stages of human life but also because he connects them with the Gospel passage discussed in the sermon in which the hours – one, three, six, nine, and eleven – appear. Mikołaj uses this five-hour division and adjusts it to the eras of the world and the stages of human life. The parable was interpreted with the consideration of the five stages of human life by, for example, St. Jerome and St. Gregory the Great. The commentary on Matthew given by Gregory the Great was borrowed by many medieval exegetes such as Haimo of Auxerre, Hrabanus Maurus, Aelfric, and Smaragdus of Saint Mihiel (Sears 1985: 84). However, the interpretation used by Mikołaj is modeled specifically on Nicholas Gorran's[7] explanation of Matthew 20: 1-16, which Mikołaj indicated as his direct source, presented in Gorran's *Postil to the Gospel of Matthew* (*Postilla super Matthaeum*), which was widely read in medieval Poland[8].

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[7] The Dominican friar Nicholas Gorran (1232-1295) is known as author of biblical commentaries and sermons. His legacy includes commentaries on the biblical books of the Old and New Testaments, *Distinctiones, Themata sermonum,* and *Quadragesimale.* In recognition of his merits in the field of exegesis, he was nicknamed *excellens postillator.* His work often constituted the basic tool in the work of preachers.

[8] In the Jagiellonian Library there are seven late 14th-century and 15th-century manuscripts (all with glosses, so certainly used in pastoral work), and four other manuscripts in Wrocław and Warsaw (Wielgus 1990: 141).

Gorran, explaining the Gospel passage about the hours ("And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny", Mt 20, 9), puts it as follows:

> This difference in hours is explained in two ways. First, the macrocosm, i.e., the greater world. And so the first [early] hour was from Adam to Noah, [the third] from Noah to Abraham. [Sixth], from Abraham to Moses. [Ninth] from Moses to the coming of Christ. [Eleventh], from the coming of Christ until the end of the world, in which the Apostles were sent for full pay, and if you come late, [you will be] accepted. […]. Secondly, it explains itself as a microcosm, that is the smaller world, that is a man, so [morning] is childhood, [in the third] adolescence; [in the sixth] youth [in the ninth] old age, [in the eleventh] senility. Therefore, at all times, in all ages, God is calling people to glory and grace.[9]

As we can see, Mikołaj does not include the entire passage from Gorran's *Postil* in his sermon in extenso (as he does, for example, in the case of long and direct quotations from *Liber sapientiae* of Holcot, see: Grzybowska 2014: 125-138), but makes explicit modifications, transmutations, abbreviations, and extensions. He carefully chooses Gorran's explanations because he is aware of the purpose of his sermon (instruction for the lay people) and its basic function (*movere*). He does not use the entire passage and does not include it *in extenso* in his sermon but rather uses the technique of corroborating the argument with additional authority. He uses a division into five ages but omits certain considerations, and thus shows his authorial decision to weave the text according to the assumptions of the previously adopted programme. Gorran, like Bede (Bede 1999: 157), speaks of the macrocosm ("the greater world") and the microcosm ("the smaller world, that is, a man"), thus presenting a specific anthropological perspective. Man is created in the image and likeness of God but from another perspective, he is just a "small world", a microcosm whose life reflects the rules and order of the universe[10]. This is part of a broader point of view presented in sermons, whereby Mikołaj consistently portrays man as the culmination of divine work, occupying a special place on the ladder of creatures. The explanation taken from Gorran would supply his outlook on

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[9] "Haec autem diversitas horarum exponitur dupliciter: Primo, de macrocosmo, id est, maiori mundo. Et sic hora prima, [mane] fuit ad Adam usque ad Noe, [Tertia,] a Noe usque ad Abraham. [Sexta,] ab Abraham usque ad Moysem. [Nona,] a Moyse usque ad adventum Christi. [Undecima,] ab adventu Christi, usque ad finem mundi, in qua Apostoli missi sunt, qui mercedem plenam, et si tarde venientes, acceperunt. […] Secundo, exponitur de microcosmo, id est, de minori mundo, scilicet, homine, et sic: In [mane,] intelligitur pueritia, [In tertia,] adolescentia; [in sexta,] iuventus; [in nona,] senectus: [in undecima,] decripita eatas. Ergo quolibet tempore, quaelibet aetate vocat Deus homines ad gloriam, et gratiam." (Gorran 1682: 236)

[10] This element is absent in Gregorian interpretation of the pericope, although Gregory the Great and Eriugena used the expression *homo omnis creatura* (Gregorius PL 76: 1214; Eriugena PL 122: 733; Kiełbasa 2014: 152-154), which may be explained as the conviction that man contains everything that the world contains (elements, forces, etc).

the man presented in both collections, although Mikołaj does not take this opportunity. Behind the omission of this aspect is the author's decision, based on the specifically understood principle of rhetorical *brevitas,* i.e., not to say anything more than what needs to be said. Mikołaj's conciseness consists in maximizing the use of the theme, the internal discipline of the text, in which each point has its place, prioritizing themes in terms of importance (*proportio* principle), and avoiding unnecessary repetitions. The topos must be functionalized within the sermon, so not everything presented in the Gorran postil will be functional in the sermon. Mikołaj renunces to explaining the topos in terms of macrocosm and microcosm. It is guided not only by the category of *utilitas,* but also *claritas.* The use of an additional, secondary topos (macrocosm-microcosm) would disturb the clarity of Mikołaj's argument, it could cause unnecessary distraction of the recipient. Here, we can recognize the high awareness of the author who carefully selects the source material and adapts it to the needs of his own text.

Mikołaj, however, not only abbreviates but also amplifies the fragment from Gorran. Mikołaj uses – but at the same time extends – Gorran's explication in Mt 20: 1-19, enriching it with numerous details, calculations, and observations, and supporting them with a moralistic interpretation. Thus, the topos of the ages of the world in Mikołaj's sermon takes on additional meaning, pointing not only to temporal but also spatial relations. The world has been arranged by God according to specific measures, and the preacher's task is to show these measures and define the status of man in the world. It is a task to reassure the laity that they are God's children, and they should act like one of those, i.e., try to be morally better and save their souls. The fragment from Gorran's postil is thus creatively transformed. The changes that Mikołaj makes using Gorran's postil have an additional meaning; they become starting point for further spiritual explanations, consistent with the adopted basic theme of the sermon, which is conversion. It is here that Mikołaj's ability to carefully select material within one topos is most fully revealed.

The works of commentators do not usually function independently from preaching, but what makes them different is the practical attitude and didacticism, which is typical for sermons. The commentator's work is about accumulating and presenting all the possible interpretations, using all options and modes of interpreting the Holy Scriptures. Although a written sermon can also be treated as a lecture on a specific topic, its creators never lose sight of the fact that it is a text primarily intended to be delivered in public. And as a text that can potentially be realized orally, it must be based on the rhetorical principles of speech, and therefore, above all, it must persuade, and not merely interpret or inform. The biblical commentary is not persuasive, but informative and exegetical. The goals – on the one hand to teach the clergy, and on the other hand, to educate the laity and to change their lives – represented the main difference between the commentary and the sermon, as the commentary placed emphasis on the rhetorical *docere,* and the sermon on the *movere.* The preacher uses Gorran's explanation of the pericope in order to persuade the faithful to change their lives. Such a moralistic and didactic interpretation is absent in the structure of the commentary because that is not its purpose. On

the contrary, it has an auxiliary function to the sermon, it is actually the set of the possibilities of using and interpreting the parable, which is then carefully selected, transformed, and creatively used by Mikołaj to build a new structure – the structure of the sermon.

In the abovementioned study of Wailes, the exegesis presented by Nicholas Gorran has been omitted. However, for some late-medieval preachers, including Mikołaj of Błonie, Gorran's postil served as the starting point for the allegorical explanations of the pericope. This shows, then, how essential the analysis of medieval sermons is to the question of rhetorical selection from many other sources. It is a matter of *inventio,* that is, in the case of work on sermons, choosing inspirations from sources and authorities, and searching for the best methods of amplification. If we want to look for traces of the author in medieval texts, we cannot ignore the importance of the author's decision to choose that specific text or excerpt from various compendiums. Sometimes, the selection is the only place where we can capture the authorship, the author's own, original sign. On the one hand, therefore, in Mikołaj's sermon we are dealing with a typical use of the division into five stages of human life and the world, while on the other, we are dealing with a conscious, original choice of a direct source that has become an inspiration for reflection. And there can be no question of a random choice here. It was dictated by Mikołaj's concern for the clear rhetorical structure of the sermon and for a coherent, memorable alegoresis intended for the simple, uneducated audience. The choice of five parts is related to the appeal for conversion – i.e., typical preaching, subordinated to the rhetorical function of *flectere.* The intertextuality of such texts as sermons assumes a conscious selection and references that are not simple repetitions or aggregation of what comes along. It is a creative activity that allows reinterpretation of the thoughts contained in the original work, giving them new meanings and contexts in an extremely functional way, focused on the ultimate goal of the brand-new created text.

Individual motifs, when used in words, become a repetition; however, they acquire a new context and meaning. The use of topoi falls within the scope of invention but simultaneously has an amplifying effect. The strategy of treating other texts and dividing them is pragmatic, and as Rouses (Rouse and Rouse 1979: 40) pointed out, it displays an aggressive attitude towards the written word. The topos is actualized with each reading and usage, and it is essential to acknowledge the role of the interpreter of the motif, which in this case is the preacher who employs topoi for a specific, broader purpose imposed on them by the genre of the sermon. In using a particular motif in a particular preaching text, the preacher imbues it with new meanings and functions. Even if the preacher uses the same phrases found elsewhere, the story gains a completely different character due to the distinct temporal and situational circumstances in which it was written and in function of the intended reader/listener. Therefore, the meaning and functions of a text depend on changing cultural and historical contexts as well as on the literary genre. In the case of a sermon, the topos must demonstrate a variant associated with eschatological and pastoral issues and the call to conversion, as this is a key component of the sermon genre, where conversion is one of the crucial topics.

Biblical genealogies

Another issue closely linked to, and to some extent a continuation of the topos *aetates mundi* in the sermon of Mikołaj is biblical genealogy. In the *De ratione temporum* Bede supplemented St. Augustine's division into world ages and corresponding biblical generations with information on the range of years of each period. This is shown in the table:

Age of the World/Days of Creation (Augustine, *De Genesi…*)	Stage of man's life (*De Genesi…*)	Generations (*De Genesi…*)	Time frame and generations (Bede, *De ratione temporum*)
first	infancy	from Adam to Noah – 10 generations	1656/2242 years, 10 generations
second	childhood	from Noah to Abraham – 10 generations	292/272 years, 10 generations/11 generations
third	adolescence	from Abraham to David – 14 generations	942 years, 14 generations
fourth	youth	14 generations	473/485 years, 17 generations
fifth	maturity	14 generations, to birth of Jesus	589 years, 14 generations
sixth	senility	from the teaching of Jesus to present times	
seventh		parousia	

Neither does Mikołaj ignore issues related to generations but presents them in a different way than his predecessors. This is mainly due to the fact that Augustine, and Bede after him, divided the history of the world into six periods (Augustine speaks of the seventh, i.e., *parousia*), and Mikołaj, like Gorran, divides it into five (Nicholaus 1498: n6r-n7r). In Mikołaj's sermon, the division looks as follows: the first era of the world (until the first hour, from Adam to Noah) contains 10 generations and 666 years passed, the second (until the third hour, from Noah to Abraham) 10 generations and 213 years. The successive era, until the sixth hour, is from Abraham to Moses, then (until the ninth hour) from Moses to Jesus, although, as the preacher points out, Hilary of Poitiers (Hilarius PL 9: 1029; an example taken from Gorran) argued that the third period lasted from Moses to David and the subsequent from David to Jesus. Then, Mikołaj states that 942 years and 14 generations elapsed from Abraham to David, and 14 generations and 472 years from David to Jesus (and 14 generations or about 588 years from Moses to Christ). The preacher reduces the number of generations, and the range of years he gives differs from that presented by Bede. For Mikołaj, like many medieval exegetes, it is not the enumerations themselves and their consistency that is important, but a spiritual explanation, indicating that those who are called last, at the 11th hour, are Christians and they have

a different mission to fulfill than, for example, Moses or David. It shows that the literal sense of the Scripture is useful for the didactic purpose of the sermon only when combined with the spiritual sense. In this way, Mikołaj emphasizes the issue of the last hour, which is a symbolic reference to religious conversion.

The use of lists of biblical generations in sermons served various functions. First and foremost, it demonstrated the sermon's close connection to the biblical tradition (Johnson 1988) and indirectly to Hebrew rhetoric because such enumerations are present in both the Old and New Testament (e.g., 1 Chr 1-9, Lk 3:23-38, Mt 1:1-17). Secondly, it indicated the symbolic meaning of numbers – hence, enumerations of biblical generations in treatises of medieval authors were based on two numbers: 10 and 14[11]. In contrast, Mikołaj emphasized other issues in his sermon. He used the biblical generations[12] and the exegesis of the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard in the first part of the sermon on Septuagesima Sunday to address many issues related to faith such as the seven deadly sins, the nature of the revelation of God, the duties of preachers, and the promise of eternal life. Furthermore, the preacher also expounded on the problem of labor and rest, using it as an example of those who work for

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[11] 14 as 2x7, and 7 is the symbol of perfection, moreover, in gematria the number 14 corresponds to the name of David. Therefore, Bede points out that the fourth period of mankind covers 17 generations, but Matthew the Evangelist lists them at 14 due to specific numerical symbolism which indicates a lower value of historical truth compared to the truth of faith. The number of generations from Adam to Christ is 77 according to Luke, and 40, according to Matthew, from Abraham to Jesus. St. Augustine attempted to clarify these discrepancies in the treatise *De consensu Evangelistarum* (although according to his calculations given in *De Genesi,* there were a total of 62 generations). This was a topic of interest for many other thinkers (including, among others, Julius African in his letter to Origen and Eusebius of Caesarea in the *Historia ecclesiastica)*, indicating, *inter alia*, a different understanding of the word "father" in the Semitic culture and the distinction between legal and natural ancestors (Łach 1977: 19-35).

[12] Genealogies were important not only from the point of view of biblical tradition. The *Historia scholastica* by Peter Comestor, one of the most important school textbooks on the literal meaning of the Bible, was often accompanied by the compendium *Historiae in genealogia Christi* by Peter of Poitiers (Smalley 1983: 214). They were initially intended as teaching aids for students, for memorization, but their meaning was wider, as medieval thinking about the Bible had three dimensions – past, present, and future, i.e., in the plan of salvation. The literal sense, taught in a historical and grammatical context, always pointed to a figurative sense in an additional perspective. For Mikołaj, just as for many other preachers, not just the mathematical calculations nor the mere compliance with biblical calculations or authorities were of paramount importance but, most of all, the spiritual interpretation, which emphasized continuity, succession, and meaning of the past and the origins. Similarly, the very historicity of Christ's genealogy is less important from the point of view of pastoral ministry and didacticism. Even more important is the spiritual significance, i.e., the continuity of tradition, and also durability as an attribute of God, which is the opposite of the variability and fallibility of the earthly world. That is the clue of the pastoral teaching – to assure the laity that the delusion and shortness of earthly life is not the only alternative for man. As Frans van Liere explained, "a right understanding of the Bible showed that this history was not a succession of random events but God's structured plan for the salvation of this world" (van Liere 2013: 128). This connection between biblical exegesis and the understanding of time shows that changes in one area seem to affect the other. On the one hand, it is a method of biblical exegesis that influences the perception of time, on the other hand, it is the measures of time that determine the ways of reading the Bible.

God and those who do not. He criticized the lack of altruism by stating that no one, including priests, wants to help another person without material benefits ("no one even lifts a finger without money"[13]). All these questions related to *cura pastoralis* could function in one sermon thanks to the use of biblical genealogies, which served as a starting point for further reflection and moral instruction.

Unlike Gorran, Mikołaj did not limit his argument on biblical genealogies to simple numbering. By using rhetorical amplification, especially figures such as enumeration, congeries, comparison, division, definition, quotation, and authority, he explained the pericope in a spiritual way and tried to show that referring to biblical generations is a form of thinking about the history of the world and mankind. Therefore, Mikołaj strengthened the use of biblical genealogies in his sermon with information about people who lived after Jesus' ascension to heaven, presenting experiences recognizable by the members of the congregation as continuation and actualization of the biblical narrative. This way, the perspective of salvation and the past become present, gaining importance and continuity. Thus, Mikołaj presents his audience with a way of thinking about time and history that determines both the present and the future. The recipients of Mikołaj's sermon are situated at a certain point of the timeline, which is not a coincidence, but part of a divine plan. These times are times of decline, heading towards the end of the story about men, hence the call for conversion.

Another popular way of presenting a discussion of the past in medieval times was the Tree of Jesse (the father of King David) as a schematic representation of the genealogy of Jesus (Watson 1934; Kipling 1998). It showed the royal origin of Christ and was associated with nature by using the figure of a tree to explain pastoral and theological issues (a poor man's Bible). Mikołaj's sermon represents another mode of theological and spiritual formation of the faithful who thus receive a "coherent message", both in the form of words and images. There is also an eschatological perspective that shows that the fall of Adam marks the beginning of history which, according to St. Augustine, is a battlefield between the city of God (*Civitas Dei*) and the earthly city (*civitas terrena*). History only matters as fulfillment and part of God's plan. People's day-to-day experience takes on universal dimensions. All matters of the world and its phenomena are part of the story of redemption, and a sermon is a form of presenting the biblical story which is actualized in the everyday life of every believer. The combination of the topos *aetates mundi* and biblical genealogies in the sermon shows the audience that they are living at the end of times and that they should not waste time and should not hesitate to convert and do good for the greatest reward, salvation. The scheme for partitioning time into five and six units showed the time as unidirectional rather than cyclic and adopted a historical and eschatological perspective, whereby physical deterioration and death were not the culmination of a life cycle. Instead, they were considered as a prelude to spiritual life. The effectiveness of Mikołaj's sermon is also determined by the narrative detail. Every tiniest part of the pericope is explained in accordance with a coherent, allegorical interpretation, and even the apparent rhetorical *dubia* do not make the listeners doubtful. On the contrary, they

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[13] "Nullus movet pedem sine pecunia" (Nicholaus 1498: n7v).

become convinced that the time of *parousia* is close and that the fate of the world is not a matter of chance. From this perspective, the world is seen as an old place, with more time in its past than in its future. This is an interpretation that has great meaning for people listening to the sermon as it defines their place in the timeline and at the same time indicates that the time of the world is running out, which can increase the sense of the end times and eschatological moods. Therefore, Mikołaj teaches and moralizes as well as indicates the meaning of God's plan, proving that time measured by the calendar is closely related to the symbolically understood centuries of mankind.

Conclusions

The topos *aetates mundi* presented in the first sermon on Septuagesima Sunday was used by Mikołaj primarily for didactic purposes. The preacher chooses from various alternatives of this motif the exegesis presented by Nicholas Gorran, Augustine and Bede. This choice allows him to combine the allegory with the evangelical pericope and gives him the opportunity to present a coherent amplification with great rhetorical impact. Mikołaj's sermon is a rich source of information about the Christian doctrine but also, and perhaps above all, a prove of rhetorical skills – especially in the selection from other sources – that Mikołaj acquired in the course of education and filtered through his individual talent.

The analysis of one topos, established in medieval literature, allows us to observe important phenomena within medieval literary communication. Mikołaj uses many sources, treating them in an extremely utilitarian way, as a means to an end, which is to morally instruct the recipients of his sermon. All the treatments he applies to the sources – abbreviations, changes in context, broadening, giving new meanings – allow him to subordinate the sources to the primary rhetorical function of *movere* in his sermon. The communicative function of a text relies on a set of decisions made before, during, or after the reading experience. Mikołaj is first a reader of the source texts, and then a creator who uses this material as a starting point. In medieval literature, rewriting and updating source texts was an act of remembrance and was strongly associated with the sphere of rhetorical invention. In the context of medieval Latin sermons, intertextuality was a common strategy used by preachers to create meaning, establish authority, and communicate religious messages to their audiences. Using topoi was a way of supporting points or arguments made in the sermon and communicating religious messages to the audience in an accessible and meaningful way.

The results of the above analyses show that Mikołaj of Błonie – like many other preachers in the Late Middle Ages – treated the topos of *aetates mundi* as a complex, layered problem with at least several different meanings. Such attachment to the literal meaning of the Bible and explaining it historically is also important when we pay attention to the change in the way of thinking about the Bible by one of the main exegetists of the Late Middle Ages, Gorran, for whom the literal was as important as the spiritual sense, and for whom from the literal sense came the spiritual. In Mikołaj's sermon, we have outlined the rational

needs, the precise explaining of detail, and the understanding that semantics (*sensus*) and textual interpretation (*sententia*) derive from words and grammar (*littera*) (Nöth 1995: 335). Worldly time in Mikołaj's text is a source of reassurance of the plan of God. In this, we can see the divine order and the parallel systems of the universe: the earthly world and the heavenly world one being a reflection of the other. Therefore, Mikołaj is less concerned with the strict interpretation of these issues and more with the practical use of biblical information. We can thus observe the journeys of biblical topoi, and how the biblical *loci communes* develop new meanings and new contexts, from the perspective of the principles of usability and persuasion.

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