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THE SOCIAL PERCEPTION OF EPIDEMICS IN THE MIDDLE AGES ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE *CHRONICLES* OF JAN DŁUGOSZ

Spoleczne postrzeżenie epidemii w wiekach średnich na przykładzie *Kronik* Jana Długosza

Abstract

The author analyzes the descriptions of epidemics in the *Chronicles* of Jan Długosz in order to gain insight into their perception in society at the time and the importance attributed to them. The annals show that common sense and intuitive knowledge prevented the spread of infections more effectively than medicine cured them. The epidemics were thought to be the result of God's judgments; astrological explanations or political and social explanations were also attached. In line with the pro-state message of the chronicles, they were seen as one of the challenges Poland faced during the first five hundred years of its existence. The plague metaphor reveals the value system of medieval society.

Keywords: social perception, plague, epidemic, Middle Ages, Jan Długosz

Abstrakt

Autorka analizuje opisy epidemii w *Kronikach* Jana Długosza w celu poznania ich ówczesnego postrzeżenia w społeczeństwie i przypisywanego im znaczenia. Z kronik wynika, iż zdroworozsądkowa i intuicyjna wiedza skuteczniej zapobiegały rozprzestrzenianiu się infekcji, niż leczyła je medycyna. Epidemie uważano za wynik wyroków Bożych; dołączano także wyjaśnienia astrologiczne i wyjaśnienia polityczno-społeczne. Zgodnie z propaństwowym przesłaniem *Kronik*, postrzegano je jako jedno z wyzwań, przed jakimi stawała Polska przez pierwszych pięćset lat swojego istnienia. Metaforyka zarazy ujawnia system wartości średniowiecznego społeczeństwa.

Słowa kluczowe: spostrzeżenie społeczne, zaraza, epidemia, średniowiecze, Jan Długosz

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Introduction

One of the fundamental and characteristic traits of the European Middle Ages was the almost constant presence of epidemic-sized infectious diseases. Their spread was influenced by wars, periods of famine, as well as migrations connected with them. In conditions of peace diseases spread in large groups of people and along trade routes. An indirect influence was also exerted by relatively constant external factors, such as unfavorable climatic conditions, as winters in Europe worsened at the end of the 13th century, and therefore harvests became smaller, which in turn resulted in a reduction in the number of livestock, shortages and an increase in food prices. High fertility increased the population, which, however, was accompanied by malnutrition and lack of immunity.² As urbanization progressed, the health of an increasing proportion of the population living in cities was affected by over-density and water scarcity.³

Due to the lack of effective methods to prevent and treat such diseases, they usually progressed dramatically and developed into full-blown epidemics which caused mass mortalities, followed by serious demographic, economic and social consequences. A quite obvious thesis can be put forward that epidemics, perceived in the Middle Ages according to the state of knowledge and religiosity of the time, on the other hand, contributed to the formation of a collective mentality. However, only a detailed analysis of the sources can reveal what was the social perception of epidemic diseases in mediaeval Poland – their causes, the phenomenon of mass mortality, as well as their immediate effects and wider significance. This article focuses on attitudes that spread and were recorded in one of the most important sources of mediaeval history – the annals of Jan Długosz. It was assumed that they represent the viewpoint of the upper classes of the feudal society of Poland and its capital at that time, i.e. the circle of the king, the bishop of Cracow and the Cracow Academy.

The wider context of social perception of epidemic diseases in the Middle Ages and the attitudes towards them is the common experience of their presence and the mentality of people living at that time. In the face of such difficult experiences, did the Christian system of values dominating society play a decisive role? To what extent were people guided by faith in magic, superstitious fear or a hedonistic desire to live their endangered life as fully as possible, or on the contrary, were guided by common sense and cautious? The attempt to answer these questions is based on the *Annals or Chronicles of the Famous Kingdom of Poland (Annales seu cronicae incliti Regni Poloniae)* written in the years 1455-80 by Jan Długosz (also known as Johannes Longinus), a canon at the royal cathedral in Cracow.⁴ These annals go back to the “earliest of times” (965 CE) and end in the year of the author’s death (1480). Jan Długosz first fulfilled an important role as a priest; then he worked in the chancellery of King Kazimierz Jagiellon where he had access to sources and other documents that were not accessible to other chroniclers. He also made use of verbal accounts, including those of his protector, Cardinal Zbigniew Oleśnicki, bishop of Cracow in the years

² K. Starczynowska, „Pomiędzy nadzieją a trwogą”. Życie codzienne w czasie ucieczek przed epidemiami w Rzeczypospolitej od połowy XVI do początku XVIII wieku, in: *Wśród córek Eskulapa. Szkice z dziejów medycyny i higieny w Rzeczypospolitej w XVI-XVIII wieku*, cz. 2, ed. Andrzej Karpiński, Warszawa 2014, pp. 8-92.

³ See J. Le Goff, *Kultura średniowiecznej Europy*, transl. H. Szumańska-Grossowa, Warszawa 1995, p. 460.

⁴ Jan Długosz, *Roczniki czyli Kroniki sławnego Królestwa Polskiego*, Books I-XII, 2002-6 [unnumbered pages], Latin text preparation: D. Turkowska, M. Kowalczyk, translation into Polish: J. Mrukówna; online version www.zrodla.historyczne.prv.pl; hereinafter quoted: Długosz, book number, annual date.

1423-55. He maintained contacts with several dozen Cracow scholars, representatives of the most important intellectual milieu in Poland.⁵ The *Chronicles*, despite subjectivism, convey a vision of history shaped according to the rules of the social circles to which he, his patrons, and the milieu in which he worked, belonged.⁶ Długosz point of view was pro-state, writing at the end of the Middle Ages, when nations were being formed and functioned in Europe as ‘communities of honour’.⁷ The extent to which the picture of epidemics fits into this attitude remains an open question.

An analysis was made of the accounts and mentions of the epidemics and various diseases that are reported in the *Chronicles* and which cover the period from the eleventh century to the author’s lifetime. Therefore they embrace the two largest epidemics of the Middle Ages – leprosy which spread after the Tartar invasion of 1241 and the Plague of 1348. Długosz wrote about epidemics that had taken place centuries ago based on a variety of sources some of which have now been identified.⁸ For example, according to Turkowska and Kowalczyk, the information about the great famine and plague in 1056 came from *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores* written by Marcin of Opava, which was repeated in other chronicles dating from 1057.⁹ Reports from several other historical sources and discussions thereof have been used as comparative materials.

The article also takes into consideration the presence of the plague in people’s memory and collective imagination, which manifested itself in the language, especially in terms

⁵ K. Ożóg, *Kontakty personalne i instytucjonalne Jana Długosza z krakowskim środowiskiem uniwersyteckim. Uwagi o stanie i perspektywach badań*, „Studia Źródłoznawcze”, vol. 15, 2017, pp. 169-70.

⁶ M. Koczerska, *Mentalność Jana Długosza w świetle jego twórczości*, „Studia Źródłoznawcze”, vol. 15, 1970, pp. 119, 135.

⁷ P. Jurek, *Dzieło Jana Długosza wyrazem służby dla państwa polskiego*, in: *Pro publico bono – idee i działalność*, eds. M. Marszał, J. Przygodzki, Wrocław 2016, p. 90.

⁸ Epidemic diseases of the Middle Ages have an abundant literature on the history of medicine. In the footnote, I only mention the most important events. The greatest epidemiological threat from the beginning of the Middle Ages up until the fourteenth century was Leprosy (*lepra*). It came to Europe in the eleventh century and its spread was associated with the return of the crusaders and the later migrations of German colonists. After a period in which it spread throughout southern and western Europe, it began to wane. In Poland it first appeared in areas inhabited by German settlers after the Tartar invasion of 1241-42, and died down in the sixteenth century. See J. Skalski, *Medycyna w Polsce przedrozbiorowej*, in: *Dzieje medycyny w Polsce*, ed. W. Noszczyk, Warszawa, 2015, p. 17. The decline in leprosy is associated with the outbreak of the plague (*pestis*) which appeared in the Crimea in 1347, and probably in several other places too, and soon spread throughout Europe. Compared with leprosy, the plague killed people suddenly, sometimes within three days or within hours of becoming infected. The people most susceptible to infection were those with weakened immune systems, for example as a result of some chronic disease. W. Szumowski, *Historia medycyny filozoficznie ujęta*, Warszawa 2008, p. 269ff. By the end of the Middle Ages, the plague had been eradicated for good, and a new contagious disease had emerged in Europe which, this time, was sexually transmitted. According to the most famous hypothesis, syphilis (*lues*) appeared at the time of Columbus’ return from his expedition to Cuba and Haiti (1492-93) and was transmitted by the natives he brought back with him. According to another hypothesis, fifty years earlier, an expedition led by Prince Henry the Navigator, had brought syphilis to Portugal along with African slaves. See F.F. Cartwright, M. Biddiss, *Niewidoczny wróg. Zarazy i historia*, transl. Monika Wyrwas-Wiśniewska, Warszawa, 2005, 58-59. During the wars waged in various periods of history, not only in the Middle Ages, people also became infected by diseases that were spread through human faeces – so-called enteric fevers: dysentery (*dysenteria*), cholera (*cholera*), epidemic typhus (*typhus exanthematicus*), typhoid fever (*typhus abdominalis*), and paratyphoid fever. F.F. Cartwright, M. Biddiss, op. cit., p. 126. In the fifteenth century Europe was consumed by St Anthony’s Fire (*erysipelas*) which took its name from the redness caused by inflammation which leads to gangrene. These were various diseases, including the most dangerous – ergotism – caused by substances produced due to the fungal contamination of grains. Outbreaks of this disease had been present in Europe for some two hundred years, reaching as far as the Lubuskie region. J. Skalski, op. cit., p. 48.

⁹ Długosz, III, AD 1056, footnote 2.

of the metaphors used. The perception of epidemic disease as a product of culture has not been discussed in a historical context so far in relation to the works of Jan Długosz, as indicated by bibliographic works revived on the occasion of the 600th anniversary of his birth¹⁰.

Aetiologies and characteristics of epidemic illnesses according to Długosz

Długosz's *Chronicles*, which cover almost five hundred years of the history of the Kingdom of Poland, relate or at least mention all the more dangerous plagues which occurred during that period. Accounts from times past reflect then contemporary knowledge about the plagues themselves and the reasons for their appearance, however, it is probable that like the whole of Długosz's works, they are very subjective.¹¹ When giving information about a plague, he always tries to explain its causes, and draws attention to the differences between the 'aetiologies' that are in line with the spirit of the epoch, fluctuating between exaggeration and superstition, and science, which had just begun to evolve. His descriptions of the symptoms of the diseases, the methods of preventing infection, and the speed with which the plague spread, are, however, presented very rationally, with reference to the medical knowledge at the time.

In the mediaeval mentality, reference to the sphere of the sacred was of superior significance. Długosz also quoted this 'meta aetiology' describing the terrible, previously unknown pestilence which struck Germany that [1094] year. With God's mercy, however, Poles and the lands that belonged to them did not experience the pestilence.¹² The *Chronicles* do not give a direct explanation as to why Poland evaded the plague, but some light is shed on this matter by the history of the then very close and lively Polish-German relations, known – among other things – from the chronicles of Gallus Anonymus. Around 1094 events occurred which made Gallus adopt a negative attitudes towards Judith, the German wife of Duke Władysław I Herman, in connection with her suspicion of her supporting the rebellion of Voivode Sieciech and of being involved in the attempts on the lives of the duke's sons – and her stepsons.¹³ The providential sparing of Poland from the plague at the end of the eleventh century directly followed the killing of St Stanisław, Bishop of Cracow (the 'Polish Thomas Beckett') by King Bolesław the Bold, which Długosz described in detail. Both the king, and knights from the four oldest dynasties in Poland, who took part in the shameful assassination of the Lord's anointed, were severely punished for their deed, the kingdom – which was subjected to papal interdiction – was fragmented according to a prophecy.¹⁴ Sparing the country from plague during the rule of the next king – Władysław I Herman (c 1043-1102) – was interpreted as appeasing God's wrath and portending the unification of Poland. The introduction to Book IV attests to this.¹⁵

¹⁰ See P. Dymmel, *Life and works of Jan Długosz described in bibliographies*, "Archival Studies", vol. 5, 2018, pp. 153-183.

¹¹ A. Zieliński, *Oskarżony Jan Długosz*, Warszawa 2011.

¹² Długosz, IV, AD 1094.

¹³ Gallus Anonymus, *Kronika Polska*, transl. R. Grodecki, Preface & compilation M. Plezia, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 2008, p. 67.

¹⁴ Długosz, IV, AD 1082.

¹⁵ Długosz, IV, AD 1082.

The unavoidable punishment for these sins was the mass insanity, inscribed in the following fragment of the *Chronicles* under the date 1107, which afflicted the Pomeranians after they committed the following sacrilegious deeds – an attempt to abduct the archbishop of Gniezno and his archdeacon and the theft of liturgical vessels.¹⁶ The events which were the direct cause of the punishment took place after years of rebellions by the Pomeranians which were subdued briefly by the victory of Bolesław III the Wrymouthed (1086-1138) in 1100, and before that the victory of his father, Władysław Herman, in 1091.

The concept of a plague as a tool for transcendental justice derives, as mentioned above, from the Old Testament. In the fourteenth century a direct mental and illustrative source of God's Wrath was the illustrated Dominican poem: *Speculum humanae salvationis* (*Mirror of Human Salvation*). Three human sins are described in the poem: *superbia* (pride), *avaritia* (avarice) and *luxuria* (lust), against which three plagues are directed: famine, war and plague, as mentioned in the story of King David.¹⁷

The idea of plagues being the effects of Divine intervention to direct people away from a path of sin was related to the influence of the stars, which after all were also created by God. Here we are dealing with a Christianized belief in the influence of celestial bodies on the fate of individuals and entire communities, which originated in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. Rehabilitation of astrology in Europe was progressed from the eleventh-twelfth century, thanks to Arabs, who preserved the Greek heritage, and the translations of astronomical and astrological treatises (including Aristotle) by early mediaeval authors, like Isidore of Seville and Bede the Venerable.¹⁸ Długosz's writings date from the fifteenth century, when the Cracow Academy was the only European university with departments of mathematics and astronomy where knowledge of astrology – which was inherently connected to those two sciences – was developing. The first department was established before 1410, and the second in circa 1459, and the Academy itself became an international centre of these sciences in the years 1480-1510.¹⁹ Therefore, regardless of personal opinions, in his theological and astrological justifications, Długosz was on safe ground regarding the knowledge of the times, and which was then still unchallenged from the perspective of truths of the faith. Długosz could obtain all the information he needed directly from renowned authorities. In this instance it was probably the physician and astrologist Marcin Król of Żurawica, future founder of the first Department of Astrology in Cracow, whom Długosz personally brought from Rome in 1450 at the behest of cardinal Oleśnicki.²⁰

Initially Długosz used astrological explanations with great caution, explaining that human investigations and actions are insufficient to explain the works of Providence. This is how he explained the 'terrible pestilence in Poland' (and in other Central European countries) in 1360, writing that it was sent by God for the many sins and crimes of people, or caused by

¹⁶ Długosz, IV, AD 1107.

¹⁷ B. Szafraniec, *Matka Boska Łaskawa*, in: *Maryja Orędowniczka Wiernych*, eds. K. Moisan, B. Szafraniec, Warszawa 1987, p. 142.

¹⁸ A. Maciąg-Fiedler, *Astrorum divina ars et scientia. Słownictwo astronomiczne w łacińskich pismach polskich autorów doby średniowiecza*, Kraków 2016, p. 11ff.

¹⁹ J. Dianni, *Pierwsze katedry nauk matematycznych na Uniwersytecie Jagiellońskim*, „Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Matematyka – Fizyka – Chemia”, no. 14, fasc. 3, 1957, pp. 8-9, 13.

²⁰ M. Zwiercan, *Marcin z Żurawicy*, in: *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 19, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków–Gdańsk 1974, pp. 580-581; Ożóg, op. cit., p. 169.

the movement, location or collision of celestial stars, or for other hidden reason.²¹ Długosz points out that the harbinger and indirect cause of the plague that occurred more than one hundred years later, in 1472, there was ‘a great comet’.²²

However, when an epidemic was not preceded by such a spectacular phenomenon as a comet, and even the influence of the stars was doubtful, Długosz tried to give an alternative reason – maybe also confirmed by a physician-astrologist. Regarding the plague in Hungary in 1441, he wrote that it had spread either because of the confluence of celestial bodies moving in opposite directions or because of bad air.²³ The belief that the disease was caused by ‘bad air’ is an important argument in Hippocrates’ theory of miasmas respected in Europe until the discoveries of Louis Pasteur.

Another type of ‘aetiology’ of plague given in the *Chronicles* is based on placing the ‘blame’ on certain individuals or groups of people. When the reason for this is negative stereotyping of them due to their being different from our own group, we can refer to the mechanism known in psychology as ‘looking for a scapegoat’. Punishing the alleged perpetrators would be equivalent to sacrificing an animal. Of course this did not stop the plague, but allowed people to regain psychological control over at least a part of reality. The ritual, which was the model for this mechanism, was aimed at cleansing the community of their sins, as described in the Old Testament’s Book of Leviticus (3 Leviticus 12:5-10, 20-22 and 26), animal offerings were also made by Israelite priests to cleanse a house of leprosy (Leviticus 14:49-53). Human offerings were made for similar purposes in Pagan cults.²⁴

In 1348 the persecution of Jews for allegedly causing epidemics in western European countries led to their exodus to the north and east.²⁵ In Poland they were welcomed and enlarged the local diasporas, however, Długosz was certain that they were responsible for the plague that struck the country that same year. This is indicated by the title in the annals which reads: ‘A terrible pestilence in Poland and other countries due to contamination of the air by the Jews [...]’, and lower down he writes that some suspected that such misfortune was caused by Jews by their poisoning the air with some lethal venom, in many places Jews were murdered.²⁶ The belief in the power of Jews to cause mass sickness had its source in the aforementioned biblical description of the Egyptian plagues. It was brought back due to fifteenth-century conflicts of interest. In 1454 King Kazimierz Jagiellon (1427-92) revoked some of the rights that had previously been granted to Jews, and extended the privileges of nobles, under the pressure of the nobility, which were included in the so-called Statutes of Nieszawa.²⁷ The interpretation of the reasons for the plague given by Długosz is therefore an indirect excuse for the king’s actions and is understandable in the light of his connections with the royal court – in the years 1455-67 he was tutor to the king’s sons.

²¹ Długosz, III, AD 1360.

²² Długosz, XII, AD 1472.

²³ Długosz, XII, AD 1441.

²⁴ J.G. Frazer, *Przenoszenie zła*, in: idem, *Złota gałąź. Studia z magii i religii*, transl. H. Krzeczkowski, Warszawa 1962, pp. 424-425.

²⁵ F.F. Cartwright, M. Biddiss, op. cit., p. 47.

²⁶ Długosz, IX, AD 1348.

²⁷ H. Zaremska, *Żydzi w średniowiecznej Polsce. Gmina krakowska*, Warszawa 2011, p. 144.

The belief that the bubonic plague was caused by poisoners of both sexes, in particular those who treated and cared for the sick (!) survived until the seventeenth century.²⁸ With regard to the emergence of contagious diseases, Długosz distanced himself from the popular explanations referring to sorcery, despite the widespread conviction that diseases were caused by demons, idols, supernatural beings and by persons evoking their evil powers through witchcraft.

While Długosz did cautiously place the reasons for the plague of 1348 within the sphere of conjecture, he had no similar doubts when determining the reasons for the plague in Ruthenia during the third Mongol invasion in the years 1287-88. He considered the Tartars to be a tool of Divine retribution to punish the Ruthenians for their earlier alliance with the Tartars against the Poles.²⁹ Długosz described the very procedure of poisoning water in great detail as a biological weapon used with premeditation. Tartars saturated hearts removed from bodies of Polish Christian prisoners of war with potent poisons, then they immersed the hearts stuck on long poles in both running and still waters. The waters thus contaminated caused such poisoning and sickness in the Ruthenians that they immediately fell down and died, because no remedy was effective.³⁰ Information about the pagan rites of the Tartars, the enslavement of Christians and the killing of prisoners of war make them an even more cruel force than the plague they caused.

A little earlier, under the date 1282, Długosz described the complex natural causes responsible for the outbreak of the plague in a very rational manner: after the wretched famine came a plague worse than anything, because diseases spread as a result of the weakening of the bodies by hunger or poisoning them with harmful food consisting of herbs, leaves of trees and scraps.³¹

Summing up, the reasons for the plague described in the *Chronicles*, except for the last two, do not go beyond the patterns adopted at that time. While the belief in the intervention of Divine Providence – directly or through natural phenomena – reflects a Christian way of thinking that is worthy of a clergyman, seeking the causes of plagues in someone else's harmful deeds, performed through real actions or witchcraft, was part of Długosz's pro-State stance. While he does not distance himself from generally accepted cause and effect relationships, neither does he engage in more personal or in-depth descriptions of them. Whenever possible, he tries to include a moralizing message about a well-deserved Divine punishment, readily emphasizing that it has affected the enemies of Poland.

The picture of plagues in the *Chronicles*

The causes and meanings of individual epidemics described by Długosz are sometimes accompanied by characteristics of the diseases themselves. Other such accurate and factual medical descriptions of symptoms are not common in mediaeval writings. One hundred years earlier Giovanni Boccaccio gave a knowledgeable account of the characteristics

²⁸ M. Łyskanowski, *Siedem zwycięstw medycyny*, Warszawa 1979, pp. 71-72.

²⁹ Długosz, VIII, AD 1288.

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ Długosz, V, AD 1288.

of victims of the bubonic plague.³² An account of the dread of the pestilence was also given by Petrarch.³³ No such descriptions are included in e.g. the chronicles of the canons regular from the monasteries in Silesia that had experience of the plague in the second half of the fifteenth century, due to the authors' insufficient knowledge or their lack of perception of 'the need to systemize the phenomenon, classify the disease and discuss the symptoms'.³⁴

However, the royal chronicler had the opportunity not only to use various sources, but also to consult eminent representatives of the scientific and medical community in the capital city, such as the aforementioned Marcin Król of Żurawica, the physician of Cardinal Oleśnicki, or Długosz's future friend Jan Stanko, the king's physician. The bubonic plague which had been present in Europe for more than one hundred years occupies an important place in these descriptions. With regard to the plague of 1348 Jan Długosz gave an account not only of its symptoms, but also the fear of the epidemic that prevailed in Poland. During the first epidemic, the disease lasted two months; the patient had a constant fever, bleeds from his mouth, and died within three days. The second time it lasted five months and in addition to the fever, boils and sores appeared on the outer parts of the body, often in the armpits and groin; the sick person died within five days. Both diseases were so contagious that they were transmitted not only through contact with the sick person, his breathing, but also 'just by looking at her'. As Długosz writes, parents avoided their own children, and children avoided their parents because they were afraid of each other. It seemed that the hearts of mankind had died and all hope was lost. The plague covered almost the entire world, so that barely one quarter of all the people survived.³⁵ The time and month of the emergence of the two waves of the disease, the average duration and its typical course, as well as the manner of its transmission and effects are described succinctly in the annals. The interesting statement that contagious diseases spread by simply looking at infected person refers to its exceptional virulence. It may mean – which was not known at the time – that germs are able to permeate the mucous membranes, including the eyes. The psychological effects of the plague were also emphasized: the fear of mutual contamination that destroys relationships between the closest of people, or falling into passivity, known in psychology as the learned helplessness syndrome, which manifests itself in situations that are impossible to control.

In his description of the bubonic plague from 1360 Długosz not only emphasized its pandemic nature but also the rather different (clinic) picture, describing it as a 'feverish plague'. It ravaged almost all the kingdoms in the west and finally turned 'home' in Poland, Hungary, Bohemia, in the lands subordinated to them and in neighbouring lands, and filled all cities, towns and villages of the Kingdom of Poland with such misfortune that, lasting incessantly for more than six months, it wiped out most of the people of all classes and of both sexes. The plague manifested itself through racking fevers, tumours (painful bulges on the skin), sores and buboes, which frequently caused death. Then, with some breaks, without abating, it prowled among the people until the middle of the following year, and then within

³² G. Boccaccio, *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio*, transl. J. Payne, New York 2007, The Project Gutenberg Ebook, www.gutenberg.org (accessed 14.11.2021).

³³ F.F. Cartwright, M. Biddiss, op. cit., p. 53.

³⁴ K. Chmielewska, „*Od powietrza, głodu, ognia i wojny – wybaw nas, Panie!*” *Kanonicy śląscy w obliczu klęsk żywiołowych*, „Prace Naukowe Akademii im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie. Zeszyty Historyczne”, vol. 13, 2014, p. 36.

³⁵ Długosz, IX, AD 1348.

three months it erupted with such severity that in many places only half of the inhabitants survived. According to Długosz, this plague differed from the one that struck Poland twelve years earlier in that the earlier wiped out many commoners, and this one killed more nobles and wealthy people, children and women.³⁶

Typical of Długosz is his meticulous emphasis of the fact that the high mortality rate concerned people mainly from the higher echelons of society. This type of information appears in the *Chronicles* in relation to various instances of death, however, it is not intended to express any empathy, but rather to emphasize the measurable loss for the State or the Church.

Apart from the bubonic plague which remained a threat throughout the fifteenth century Długosz also described the epidemic of madness that developed among the Pomeranians at the beginning of the twelfth century, which may be associated with the mass poisoning with ergot, which causes ergotism (known as St Anthony's or Holy Fire). Sick people falling into madness and epilepsy rolled around, losing their senses. Not only they themselves, but also their wives, relatives, and their children were afflicted with a disease similar to senseless madmen, they threw iron objects and stones at each other. They evicted friends and servants from their homes and when they could not reach them, they bit themselves or scratched themselves with their claws. Many of them developed the disease and died.³⁷ The description of the uncontrollable strong psychomotor agitation and aggression could have been caused by symptoms of the disease: severe itching (*pruritus*), painful muscle contractions, convulsions, manic elevation of mood, delusions and visual and auditory hallucinations.³⁸ According to the chronicler the direct cause of the fatal disease was their aforementioned sacrilegious contact with the *sacrum* – their attempt to steal liturgical vessels and the kidnapping of the archbishop and abduction of the archdeacon.

Memories of leprosy, which was by then endemic, are also recorded in the *Chronicles*. Among the many contagious diseases afflicting humanity, leprosy is the only one that is often mentioned in the Bible which is probably why Długosz sacralised and elevated it. He first mentions leprosy in reference to a pope who died four centuries earlier, St Leon IX (pontificate 1049-1054) who was moved by the thought that in the person of a poor leper he received Christ himself³⁹, a story taken from *Historia ecclesiae*.⁴⁰ He also described instances of healings by the martyr Werner, bishop of Płock (1156-1170)⁴¹ and St Kinga.⁴² Werner was probably of German origin, and St Kinga, duchess of Cracow, was born a Hungarian princess of the Arpad dynasty. Therefore, their Polish identity, in accordance with the pro-State message of the *Chronicles*, is understood by the important role each of them played in their new homeland. Długosz appealed to local patrons, probably in the name of a pro-state

³⁶ Długosz, IX, AD 1360.

³⁷ Długosz, IV, AD 1107.

³⁸ T. Haarmann, Y. Rolke, S. Giesbert, P. Tudzynski, *Ergot: from witchcraft to biotechnology*, "Molecular Plant Pathology", vol.10, no. 4, 2009, pp. 563-564.

³⁹ Długosz, III, AD 1054.

⁴⁰ Długosz, III, AD 1054, footnote 4.

⁴¹ Długosz, V, AD 1170.

⁴² Długosz, VIII, AD 1292.

message, resigning from references to the cult of the most famous “saints from the plague”, such as Sebastian⁴³ or Roch⁴⁴.

It follows from the quoted and other accounts relating to the people who died as a result of the plague that their deaths were perceived in terms of a society of ‘estates’. Only the names of the highborn, mostly clergymen, are given. Długosz gives information about their deaths without any comment that would indicate any emotional engagement, not to mention empathy vis-à-vis his fellow brothers in the priesthood. The following is a good example that is characteristic of the chronicler’s standpoint: ‘Bishop Venantius, after spending 23 years in the Włocławek, i.e. Kruszwica bishopric, died after being infected with the plague’.⁴⁵ Sometimes the fact that a dignitary, who had a more important mission to perform survived, takes the form of ‘Platonic’ satisfaction, such as the account of the appointment of ‘Janusz, of Polish and noble origin’ as bishop of Gniezno in 1258. At the pope’s behest he immediately went to Rome where he was consecrated, after which he ‘returned to Poland in full health, while his companions: Henryk, deacon of Poznań, and Przybysław, canon of Gniezno, died of the plague in Lombardy’.⁴⁶

Also the issue of preventing contagious diseases was subjected to social standing, thus gaining a far more profound meaning. As mentioned above, anonymous members of society took precautions that were governed by common sense, e.g. during the plague of 1348. However, the chronicler gives an account of King Władysław III of Varna who visited Hungary during the raging plague and with obvious admiration, speaks of the king’s total disregard of the danger: ‘he maintained such steadfastness when faced with this danger that he neither avoided larger gatherings or company and did not seek refuge, but stayed in public places and sat about in the city of Buda where the plague was most rampant so much so that each day several dead were found in the royal apartments; and often in the presence of the king people dropped to the ground and died in convulsions during a church service’.⁴⁷ The fearless king who died three years later at the battle of Varna (10 November 1444) was the elder brother of Kazimierz Jagiellon, whom Długosz served, and he owed the crown to Długosz’s protector – Bishop Zbigniew Oleśnicki. He is shown in the *Chronicles* as having the virtues of King David, God’s fearless anointed because ‘The Lord was with him.’ His stance in the face of danger is illustrated in the Psalm: ‘His truth shall compass thee with a shield: thou shalt not be afraid of the terror of the night. Of the arrow that flieth in the day, of the business that walketh about in the dark: of invasion, or of the noonday devil. A thousand

⁴³ St Sebastian was a popular patron of the plague in the fourteenth century. During his lifetime the youth was already endowed with the power to heal diseases, which was particularly effective for those who had renounced paganism and courageously acted against idolatry. Emperor Diocletian had him killed by archers and despite the fact that ‘so many arrows were stuck in him that he looked like a hedgehog’, he did not die and completed his mission. J. de Voragine, *Złota legenda. Wybór*, transl. J. Pleziowa, Wrocław 1996, p. 118.

⁴⁴ In the late Middle Ages the saints, who were almost contemporaneous with those suffering from the disease, were also asked for mediation, such as St Roch of Montpellier, a 14th-century tertiary Franciscan, who himself became infected when returning from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and was miraculously cleansed by an angel. He later devoted himself to caring for victims of the plague. J. Seibert, *Leksykon sztuki chrześcijańskiej. Tematy, postacie, symbole*, Kielce 2007, p. 272.

⁴⁵ Długosz, III, AD 1055.

⁴⁶ Długosz, VII, AD 1258.

⁴⁷ Długosz, IX, AD 1441.

shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand: but it shall not come nigh thee. But thou shalt consider with thy eyes: and shalt see the reward of the wicked.’ (Psalms 90: 5-8).

Conclusion

The plague was nearly always present in the lives of mediaeval people; for them it became a point of reference often evoked to explicitly define all misfortunes and vices that were on a mass scale and could reach everyone. Długosz used this metaphor to describe the most damaging social phenomena in three subsequent centuries. The first was idolatry – betrayal of the First Commandment of the Decalogue. In the eleventh century rebellions, known as the pagan reaction, broke out in Poland and Hungary. With reference to the coronation of the King of Hungary Andrew I in 1048, Długosz emphasized his contribution to the restoration of Christianity: ‘thanks to Andrew’s zeal the plague, which spread widely and to everyone’s misfortune, was suppressed and the worship of idols was quashed’.⁴⁸

In the next century Poland entered an unfavourable period of progressive feudal fragmentation (1138-1320). Describing the times which preceded the breakdown of the districts, Długosz noted that the Poles ‘feared the fragmentation in the same way they feared the plague, justifiably expecting it to soon lead to disorder, internal disturbances and to bring misfortune to the citizens’.⁴⁹ In the thirteenth century the Mongols, for the first time, invaded Poland which had become weakened due to internal disputes (1241). In the *Chronicles* this was described as a just punishment: ‘The most gracious and best God, angered by ugly filth and unworthy and despicable misdeeds [...] allowed his wrath to severely afflict the Poles, *not with plague*, not with famine, not with the hostility of Catholic peoples, but with the ferocity and savagery of barbarians’.⁵⁰

The pessimistic vision of a country afflicted by a widespread plague with many different faces involves a critical understanding of human nature. Here, however, Długosz sets himself as an edifying example of overcoming the sins of the flesh, despite the fact that they are as dynamic and contagious as deadly diseases. In both cases salvation may come by the will of God – especially of the soul. The ‘miraculous improvement in the life of Jan de Conradville, parish priest at the Strzelno monastery’ in 1442 was given as an example. Earlier having held both religion and all shame in contempt, and dishonourably inciting the abuse of the duties of his office, he led a dissolute and shameless life, loathsome both to God and other people and spread ‘a plague of lewdness’ around him.⁵¹ This moral lesson was taken from the Sixth Commandment and its interpretation in the Gospels (Matthew: 5:27-28). In this spirit, in the Rule written for monks, St Augustine taught about the need for pure hearts, contrasting them with tainted hearts – contaminated with the plague: an indecent look could destroy the modesty of the heart and once the heart became contaminated, ‘it would become for others a pestilence similar to the plague [...] and would contaminate the soul with internal stains’. In the last fragment a comparison is made to the dreadful symptoms of the plague.⁵²

⁴⁸ Długosz, III, AD 1048.

⁴⁹ Długosz, V, AD 1140.

⁵⁰ Długosz, VII, AD 1241.

⁵¹ Długosz, VII, AD 1442.

⁵² J.L. Sicre Diaz, *Duchowość proroków*, in *Historia duchowości*, vol. 1: *Duchowość Starego Testamentu*, eds. A. Fanuli, J.L. Sicre Diaz, M. Gilbert, R. Cavedo, G. Ravasi, Kraków 1998, p. 306.

The metaphor of the plague reveals a system of values to which the message of the *Chronicles* is subordinated. Faith in the judgments of Providence does not always protect the body, soul and social life from disease, but it is necessary in order to heal them.

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