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**Anna Jabłońska**  
**The Image of the Past in Songs  
between the Middle Ages (10th c.) and the 18th  
Century in Poland**

**Key words:** Polish songs, historical source, Middle Ages, Early Modern Period

**Summary**

The purpose of this article is to reveal the importance of songs in terms of the depiction of the past and as a source of knowledge about Poland from the Middle Ages to the 18th century as exemplified by compositions created at that time. The most distinct instances are songs used as anthems (Polish religious and military songs) and patriotic songs. Many of the compositions described war, due to Poland's military involvement at that time. These songs convey not only knowledge about historical events, but also emotions from the point of view of common people. The songs also tell about the cruelty towards innocent people. These musical compositions also include descriptions of certain historical figures like Polish rulers. Besides, the images and positions of women are presented as well as depictions of everyday life. Musical compositions were created during the events or afterwards. History was told from the perspective of either outsiders or participants. Songs informed about events and historical figures, evoked emotions, shared memories of history, created a certain image of the past. They were produced within given religious and social circles, but also constituted part of popular and folk culture. This image of the past was influenced by the author, circumstances in which the songs were created, their purpose, and expected recipients. Songs comprise a very subjective source material; however, they allow to understand not only the historical events of the era, but also people living in the past – their material and spiritual world and feelings in a more direct way. Songs constitute an important element of historical awareness in society. Some of them are still a building block of today's identity and culture, and they influence how history is viewed by the Polish society of the 21st century.

**Introduction**

Between the 10th and the 18th centuries in Poland, specifically during the Medieval period, illiteracy was prevalent. People did not have access to education or any form of written texts. Unsurprisingly, in this kind of oral culture it was the

spoken word and human memory that played an important role. The song was a very powerful means of telling a story about the past and present.

During the period under discussion, Polish society consisted of a few estates. Songs sometimes were meant for a specific group exclusively or were created within a certain circle of people. Importantly, musical compositions often blurred the lines that separated those groups, and some of the songs became popular and commonly known.

The present article regards the songs created during the period under discussion.

### Definition

The Polish language distinguishes between *pieśń*, a solemn, dignified song, and *piosenka*, a popular song. *Pieśń* (hymn) is a “vocal creation for a composition in verse [...] the most common musical form since Antiquity” (Chodkowski 1995, 689-690). There is also a song, literary genre, which will not be a subject of this article (Ślęk 1985, 165-167). *Piosenka* (folk tune) is, on the other hand, “a short musical composition of words and music, a basic form used in popular music” (Chodkowski 1995, 691).

### Examples of hymns and folk tunes

The Latin composition (“Rejoice, oh Mother Poland” *Gaude Mater Polonia*) by Wincenty of Kielce is one of the most important and earliest Polish hymns. It is related to a prominent figure in the history of Poland and the Polish Church, Stanisław, Bishop of Kraków, whose conflict with Polish King Bolesław II the Generous in the 11th century changed the course of Polish history and venerated Stanisław as a saint.

The hymn was created in the 13th century at the time of canonization of Stanisław to be used within the Church, but the music of the hymn was widespread in the Middle Ages (Michałowska 1995, 167-180, 218-220, 477-483). It became the national anthem for the following centuries. Currently, it is sung during ceremonial moments.

“Mother of God” (*Bogurodzica*) is a solemn Medieval hymn written entirely in Polish. It is the oldest composition of parts dating back to the 13th and 14th centuries (Feicht 1975, 131-233; Michałowska 1995, 278-293). It is devoted to God’s Mother who is especially worshipped in Poland. It is also the oldest hymn used as a national anthem. Jan Długosz calls it “patrium carmen” (the hymn of the fatherland) and comments that, in 1410, during the Battle of Grunwald, Polish knights chanted *Bogurodzica* before engaging into the fight, in which the Polish–

Lithuanian Commonwealth defeated the Teutonic Order (Długosz 2009, 122). It was one of the most tremendous victories in the history of Poland, and the hymn became its symbol.

The current Polish national anthem is “The Song of the Polish Legions in Italy” (*Mazurek Dąbrowskiego*, lyrics: Józef Wybicki, music: anonymous composer) created and sung by Polish troops supporting Napoleon. Soldiers believed that they were fighting to liberate Poland, which disappeared from the maps of Europe in 1795 when Austria, Prussia, and Russia divided its land among themselves. *Mazurek* in 1797 begins with the line: “Poland has not yet died, so long as we still live”. The song also refers to another momentous event in the history of Poland when it defeated enemies during the Swedish Deluge in the 17th century.

*Mazurek* not only informed Poles about past events, but also conveyed incredible emotional charge and hope. The hymn was very popular from the start and was sung during major events (Lewinówna 1984, 646-648).

Hymns are part of patriotic songs, which play an important role in any nation and country. They inform about history, evoke certain emotions and share values. For this reason and to commemorate Polish rulers and kings in the 16th century, a historical songbook was created. Written in Polish, it included short compositions and important information about the historical figures and how they were regarded. It was recommended to sing the lyrics alongside popular melodies at the time (Głogor 1905).

Before the partitions, Poland had been engaged in numerous domestic and foreign wars with the Teutonic Order, the Tatars, Swedes, Muscovy/Russia, Turks and the Cossacks, among others. People sang about these events and the major figures involved in them, expressing the emotions they evoked. Many of those memories then and some today constitute the foundation of Polish identity.

The compositions also depict diverse opponents and fronts where Poland had fought. They mention important figures like Polish heroes, kings, etc. and events, such as the Siege of Jasna Góra in 1655. The “New Hymn about Muscovite Tyranny” (*Pieśń nowa o tyraństwie moskiewskim*) was written in the 17th century. The oldest (from the early 15th century) was the hymn about the Battle of Grunwald (Andrzejewski 1939).

The songs reveal a different perception of Ukraine, which used to be part of Poland. They were sung in Polish and Old East Slavic language used in the Early Modern Period in the Commonwealth. People sang about the Tatars, the Turks, Muscovites, the Cossacks and the Lendians – Polish people. Poles were usually portrayed as knights, heroes or victims, and sometimes enemies, depending on who and in what circumstances wrote the *lyrics*. Cossacks were portrayed in a



similar way, positively or negatively (Andrzejewski 1939, No. 43, 55, 66, 69, 76).

The itinerant musicians, *lirnyks*, also performed *dumy* – stories about history in the form of a song – e.g. about the capture of Kamieniec Podolski by Turks in 1672 (Andrzejewski 1939, No. 48). There are also Ukrainian *dumy*, epic songs about the history of Ukraine (*Na ciche wody* 2000).

The compositions did not only portray important figures and events, but also described the lives and emotions of common people. There are also humorous songs, such as those about soldiers making advances towards girls (Adrjański 1997, 36; Andrzejewski 1939, e.g. No. 56). Songs and hymns reveal the brutality of the war towards innocent people (Adrjański 1997, 28-29; Andrzejewski 1939, no 31, 48).

Songs were part of everyday life then, and now function as its depiction. (*Idzie żołnierz borem, lasem* “Soldier walks through the forest”), probably written in the 16th century, was very popular for a few centuries and is known even today. It tells a story about the sorrows of a hungry and tattered soldier who goes to war and after a year and a half his sister is informed about his death. Only his horse survived, but without the owner it will not escape its fate. The moral was: “Better to follow the plough at home than a long trail at war” (Kowalski 2006, 168-170). Polish soldiers were often underpaid, and the strategy and tactics of the army were based on cavalry.

A different fragment of life in the Middle Ages is represented in the Latin composition *Breve regnum* (“A short reign”). This unique composition was written, including notes, in the 15th century. It was a song describing a custom from Kraków, capital of Poland. Students of Kraków would elect their king for a few days in October and take control of the city, creating a “world in reverse order” (Michałowska 1995, 731-732).

Another part of the city life is presented in lyric and erotic poems from the 17th century Kraków – a city where educated people and artists lived. They were probably the anonymous authors of cheap brochures printed in local print shops. Collections of those poems were also available to the public. Before World War II, they were edited under the title “Songs-dances-Paduans”<sup>1</sup>.

Poems were used for entertainment, as guides and advice for professional musicians. They were sung, people danced and listened to them. They were part of the bourgeois, folk, and popular culture. The poems depict platonic love but also desire, sometimes in a more sophisticated manner, sometimes more suggestively. They provide a picture of human relations, rich language, customs (Badecki 1936).

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<sup>1</sup> Song imitating music created in Padua.

Among the information that can be found in songs and hymns is, for instance, portrayal of women and their status in Poland from the Middle Ages to the early modern period. There were different types of women: saint, ruler, mother, wife, sister, loved one, lover, victim, gorgon, archetypes of Eve and Mary. Songs show the ideal and the worst example of a woman and how they were regarded by men (Jabłońska 2012, 41-64).

### **Conclusions**

The music and lyrics of songs are means of sharing and circulating certain information, but what people sing about also has the value of evoking emotion and facilitating learning the lyrics.

Regarded as an image of the past, songs should be subject to source criticism because they are characterised by subjectivity, rhetorical terms and elements of music. The works also express the author's subjectivity, and sometimes they were created with specific intentions; they do have many advantages. Songs inform about selected events and figures, which are then evaluated. They are also a fragment and at the same time a reflection of social life – official, daily, and unusual. They present ethics, behaviour, and hierarchy; they describe not only prominent figures but also common people, their world and feelings. In addition to providing knowledge, they also allow to see another side of history, its more “human” face.

Songs were created during the events or afterwards. History was told from the perspective of either outsiders or participants. Compositions were created and served their purpose within different social groups, in high and popular culture. They were known by professional musicians and amateurs. They penetrated various social circles, being a common denominator. The composition itself is crucial, its origins, characteristic features, reception, etc. Some of the songs are also considered important literary creations such as *Bogurodzica*.

They exist in two timeframes: in the past analysed in this article, when they provided information and commentary regarding current situation or historical events; and in the 21st century, when they comprise an element and image of the past. Some of the analysed compositions have survived for centuries. Songs and hymns are an important part of collective consciousness and historical awareness in society. They use myths and symbols. When analysing songs and hymns, the purpose of a historian's work remains similar; it is not only recreating the past but also understanding contemporary people. This is done to better comprehend our identity and historical awareness today. Musical compositions store information about the past and present that has been considered worth attention and remembering.

The idea for this article came when I was reading information about the war in Ukraine on the Internet. There were recordings of songs and hymns. I realised how powerful they are. They evoke strong emotions, leave a mark in how we view and remember history, events, and people.

Translated by Gabriela Sablik

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### **Pagātnes tēls Polijas viduslaiku dziesmās (10.–18. gadsimts)**

**Atslēgas vārdi:** poļu dziesmas, vēstures avots, viduslaiki, agrais modernais periods

#### **Kopsavilkums**

Raksta mērķis ir parādīt dziesmu nozīmi pagātnes atainojumā, zināšanu sniegšanā par Poliju laika posmā no viduslaikiem līdz 18. gs. Par Polijas pagātni liecina tā laika radītās muzikālās kompozīcijas. Izteikti piemēri ir himnas (poļu reliģiskās un militārās dziesmas) un patriotiskās dziesmas. Daudzas kompozīcijas vēsta par kariem, kuros Polija bija iesaistīta. Šīs dziesmas pauž ne tikai zināšanas par vēstures notikumiem, bet arī par emocijām, nežēlību pret nevainīgiem cilvēkiem. Muzikālajās kompozīcijās iekļauti atsevišķu vēsturisko personību, piemēram, poļu valdnieku, apraksti, reprezentēts sieviešu tēls, attēlota ikdienas dzīve. Muzikālās kompozīcijas tapa notikumu laikā vai pēc tiem. Vēsture tiek stāstīta no novērotāja vai dalībnieka perspektīvas. Dziesmas par vēstures notikumiem un personām izraisa emocijas, rada zināmu pagātnes tēlu noteiktā reliģiskā un sociālā lokā, veido tautas kultūras daļu. Šo pagātnes tēlu ietekmējis autors, apstākļi, kādos tapušas dziesmas, to mērķis un potenciālie klausītāji. Dziesmas ir subjektīvs avotu materiāls; tās ļauj izprast ne tikai vēstures notikumus, bet arī pagātnes cilvēku materiālo un garīgo pasauli. Dziesmas ir nozīmīgs sabiedrības vēsturiskās apziņas elements. Dažas no tām arī mūsdienās joprojām ir identitātes un kultūras pamatelementi; tās ietekmē, kā uztver vēsturi 21. gadsimta poļu sabiedrība.