

## On the Past and Present of the Sarmatian Idea in Poland<sup>1</sup>

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It is perhaps not a very well known fact in Iran that Middle Europe, including our country Poland (Polish *Polska*, also *Lechistan*), was termed by an ancient author Ptolemy, in the II century AC, European Sarmatia, and Eastern Europe was termed Asian Sarmatia. Before him, Pomponius Mela, in about the year 44 AC, placed Sarmatia between the river Vistula<sup>2</sup> and Germania. It was understood that these designations were somehow associated with the famous Old Iranian tribes called the Sarmatians. According to historians they lived in the region of the lower Volga between IV-II century BC, but already in the I century BC had started to moved westwards, towards the Danube, a European river (e.g. Niedźwiedź 2001: 172-3; Sulimirski 1970: 157).

We find diverse opinions as to how far Slavonic and Iranian tribes might have been somehow, even genetically, related. Some scholars take into account such a possibility (e.g. Sulimirski 1979), some exclude it totally (e.g. Borowski 2002: 23). It is very likely that in a not very distant future so-called population genetics will add the results of its research conducted on the microbiology level and will end these long polemics. Nevertheless at least some linguistic material supports the idea of some kind of contacts or relationship between Indo-Iranian and Slavonic languages. Let's note, for instance, such well known cognate as the Old Persian word *baga-* 'god' and the Polish word for 'god' even in its contemporary form '*bóg*' (e.g. Reczek 1985: 56).

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<sup>2</sup> Situated within the contemporary Polish borders.

It should be stressed that the phenomenon of the Sarmatian idea in Poland is polymorphic, multicoloured and possessing a diversity of interesting aspects. In writing such a short text we can only, unfortunately, mention some of its numerous phenomena, but an abundance of literature, books and papers, do exist, not only in Polish but in many others for those participants of this conference interested in the topic. We even have a dictionary of our Sarmatian ideas, published in Poland, in Cracow in 2001. In some of these publications the words "Sarmatian" and "Sarmatians" have been used between inverted comas to express doubts about their real Sarmatian meaning or origin (e.g. Borowski 2001b: 7).

Lets say that the Polish term *sarmatyzm*, difficult to translate exactly into English or Persian with all its rich semantic range, is very often understood as something connected with the Old Polish character, while the Polish word *Sarmata* means not only 'a member of ancient Iranian tribes' but also 'a man of an Old-Polish character' (e.g. Stanisławski 1964: 1037; Kopaliński 1988: 454; 1998: 1037).

Generally the Polish word *sarmatyzm*, for which the nearest translation, not perfect however, is perhaps 'Sarmatian idea', 'Sarmatian ideas'. This refers not only to the history of the social and national consciousness of Polish noble men, having rank of nobility, in Latin *natio Polonorum*, but it refers also to the diverse components of Polish intellectual and material culture (e.g. Borowski 2001c: 175).

In the Middle ages the term 'Sarmatia' was still in use to designate Middle Europe and 'Sarmatians' to designate Poles, or other Slavonic nations living nearby. Authors writing later still applied this toponym and this anthroponym to Poland and Poles. In the XVI century the toponym 'Sarmatia' almost replaced the designation 'Poland' as writes, for instance, Tadeusz Sulimirski (Sulimirski 1970: 188). A Polish historian Maciej, born in Miechów, among other writers, in his work written in Latin in the year 1517 and entitled *Tractatus de duabus Samatiis Asiana et Europiana*, treats Polish Jagiellonian monarchy and Moscow as European Sarmatia. This designation made in Europe and in Poland a real career, despite the fact that the full genesis of the Polish Sarmatian idea is not totally clear. Moreover it was never fully studied without prejudices. We certainly need more research on this matter. Still in XVII century these designations 'Sarmatia' and 'Sarmatians' used to be synonyms of Poland and Poles (e.g. Niedźwiedź 2001: 172-3; Zierhoffer 1998: 313) but the XVI to the XVIII century is usually treated as the main period of the rise

of Sarmatian ideas in Poland and its full bloom (e.g. Borowski 2001c: 175-177).

As far as the political aspect is concerned this Polish Sarmatian idea was always associated with freedom, a traditional Sarmatian love of freedom. There was even a well known Latin term in use *aurea libertas* 'golden freedom' (Borowski 2001c: 178). Incidentally in one of the contemporary languages traditionally included into the group of Iranian languages, namely Ossetic, we find *saermae laeg* what means 'free man' (e.g. Littleton 1998: 746). It was also thought that Polish Sarmatians, as the successors of the ancient Sarmatians, were very brave. These Polish Sarmatians believed also that they are rightly proud. We had something like the Sarmatian knightly ethos and a Sarmatian ethos of good citizenship in Poland. What should be stressed, among other things, is the famous Polish hospitality, also treated as a Sarmatian feature, as well as our Old-Polish religious tolerance. On the other hand this Sarmatian religious tolerance was somehow strongly bound with the Catholic faith (e.g. Borowski 2001: 178-90; Urban 2001: 46-7). It is believed that in the XVI century the Sarmatian myth and Sarmatian idea played a very positive, uniting role in our multiethnic and multireligious society.

But let's frankly add that with the Old – Polish Sarmatian characteristics not only positive but also some negative features could be pointed out such as, for instance, megalomania, anachronism, some kind of conservatism and a few others (e.g. Niedźwiedź 2001: 175). Some researchers mention Sarmatian xenophobia and fanaticism (e.g. Kopaliński 1998: 1037) but others, on the contrary, stress Sarmatian openness for people having alien views and their acceptance. One can find such views that it is thanks to the Sarmatian style of thinking and Sarmatian ideals that we never had, even after this very Sarmatian period in Polish history and culture, already after the partition of Poland, the persecution of people of other religious beliefs. Such expressions even as 'asylum for heretics' (Polish '*azyl dla heretyków*') or 'state without stakes' (Polish '*państwo bez stosów*') were in use to designate Poland (Tazbir 1976: 18-19). Thus persecution of peoples of other religious beliefs was perceived as wrong by the Polish Sarmatians.

One of our historians, Tadeusz Chrzanowski, writes that generally, within the circle of Sarmatian ideas, there was a disinclination, an aversion towards terror and attempts to understand the way of thinking of other people, also a feeling of common humanity towards others, something

functioning simultaneously with local patriotism (Chrzanowski 1988: 43-7, 316, 320).

The Sarmatian idea has also been introduced in our material culture. Our famous Polish king, Jan Sobieski the III<sup>rd</sup> living in XVII century, called 'King-Sarmatian' (Polish 'król-Sarmata') was famous in this matter. But the first Polish king who started to introduced Sarmatian, it fact Oriental in those times, elements into our national costumes, arms and generally into our Polish taste and style was already King Stefan Batory (1575-86) his predecessor. The idea of adopting Oriental ideas was of course not limited only to these three area mentioned. One can find the so-called Sarmatian style in painting, architecture, churches inclusive, the arranging of interiors in Polish noble houses etc. (e.g. Chrzanowski 1988: 43-7). During the Sarmatian times distinctive Sarmatian costumes were popular and were worn in Poland. They had clearly Oriental elements, for instance silk sashes, a special kind of belt or rather girdle, imported from Turkey, Persia or India. And it is only one small detail here of the Sarmatian taste for beauty (e.g. Ostrowski 2001: 137-9; Taszycka 1990: 7-15). Later on we had even our indigenous manufactures producing such splendid sashes, called in Polish language *persjarnie*, designation related to the Polish word *perski* meaning 'Persian'. Thus Oriental influences in material culture, Persian inclusive, were without doubt perceived positively.

As we see this Polish Sarmatian period was very open to syncretism, to foreign ideas which have enriched it substantially. In fact in the XVIII century we experienced a kind of symbiosis with some elements of Oriental culture (e.g. Chrzanowski 1988: 43-7; Kieniewicz 1999:102). The Sarmatian idea in Poland was not only a linguistic but also a cultural, spiritual, social and political fact.

But the reflexes of Sarmatian ideas and the term 'Sarmatian', both as an adjective and a substantive, were present also in the XX century and are still present in contemporary Poland. It is possible to prepare a long list of their use. Let's cite some examples in chronological order, from among those which I have collected by chance, without a lot of effort. One can find among the many examples present within the last ten years:

A paper written by Jan Błoński – 'The Sarmatian idea in Gombrowicz's writing' (Polish '*Sarmatyzm u Gombrowicza*') (Błoński 1976: 137-153).

An exhibition in the Poznań National Museum entitled 'Vanitas. A coffin portrait against the background of the Sarmatian funeral customs'

(Polish '*Vanitas. Portret trumienny na tle sarmackich obyczajów pogrzebowych*') (np. Torbicka 2004).

A lecture given in National Museum in Cracow entitled 'Sarmatians – the genesis of Polish costume' (Polish '*Sarmaci – geneza ubioru polskiego*'). Data found in the Museum's leaflet (1998).

We read in an article that the Sarmatian myth is present in the books written by Henryk Sienkiewicz, our national writer (Bujnicki 1999). As we know we have many of them in film version as well and it is treated as belonging to our national cinema.

In a newspaper we find an article 'Among us Sarmatians' (Polish '*Miedzy nami Sarmatami*') (Strońska 1999).

We find in an article on Polish historical gardens the term 'Sarmatian garden' and it is perceived as a positively indigenous one (Woźnicka 2000).

Another article, about good manners, rather satiric in style, entitled 'Oh, our beloved Sarmatia' (Polish '*Sarmacja, nasza ukochana*') can be found in the local press in Cracow. And a statement within it: "Oh, our beloved Sarmatia! You persist as a bedrock". (Polish "*Ech, Sarmacja, nasza ukochana! Trwasz jak opoka.*") ("Brat Chama" 2000).

A newspaper, *Dziennik Polski*, printed in 2000 reminds us that in 1919 a company was established in Krakow called 'The Society for Sea Navigation – Sarmatia' (Polish '*Towarzystwo Żeglugi Morskiej – Sarmacja*') (Stec 2000).

In 2001 a *Dictionary of Polish Sarmatism – ideas, conceptions, symbols* (Polish *Słownik sarmatyzmu polskiego – idee, pojęcia, symbole*), edited by Andrzej Borowski, was published in Cracow.

A contemporary Polish television film serial *Kiepscy* was described "as the most successful transfer of the Sarmatian archetype into advanced Polish modernity" (Polish "*najbardziej udane przeniesienie w późną polską nowoczesność archetypu sarmackiego*") (Michalski 2001).

During a conference devoted to the Professor Jan Błoński and XXth century literature one of papers given was entitled 'A Sarmatian in a besieged fortress' (Polish '*Sarmata w oblężonej twierdzy*') (The conference programme, 2001).

In another article we find such a sentence "The problem of Sarmatism seemed to me still valid for diverse reasons" (Polish "*Problem sarmatyzmu wydał mi się z różnych powodów nadal aktualny*") (Pieszcachowicz 2001).

In a catalogue, printed by the Ossolineum publishing house in 2004, there is one book advertised, edited by Dorota Heck, entitled *Cosmopolitism and Sarmatism. An anthology of the post-war Polish essay* (Polish *Kosmopolityzm i sarmatyzm. Antologia powojennego eseju polskiego*).

During a conference in Cracow "Polish Studies in Reconstruction: Literary Studies – a Knowledge of Language and Culture – Education" (Polish „*Polonistyka w przebudowie: literaturoznawstwo – wiedza o języku i kulturze – edukacja*”) a paper entitled 'Sarmatian and Enlightenment literature, art, a vision of the world in educational curricula' (Polish 'Sarmacka i oświeceniowa literatura, sztuka, wizja świata w programach edukacyjnych') was placed within the programme (The conference programme, 2004).

In 2004 an exhibition in the Poznań National Museum 'Nobel heritage or damned legacy. The Sarmatian tradition in art and culture' (Polish 'Szlachetne dziedzictwo czy przeklęty spadek. Tradycje sarmackie w sztuce i kulturze') was opened on the 11<sup>th</sup> December and lasted till 28 February 2005. We read in a newspaper article that the exhibition tries to find out "how the Sarmatian seed germinates through consecutive epochs" (Polish "jak ziarno sarmackie kielkowało w kolejnych epokach"). It was also stated that Sarmatism was the ideology of Polish noble men but as a mental category it survives till the present day (Torbicka 2004).

And these are only a couple of examples which can be found in contemporary Poland. Thus the Sarmatian idea, whatever one ascribes it to, is still present and alive in our society, our culture, and our style of thinking.

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