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The Sea/Earth/Heaven Formula in Cracovian Mythology, in Master Vincent's *Chronica Polonorum*, the Old Norse *gríðamál* and Other Similar Formulas

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Abstract: The early 13th-century *Chronica Polonorum* contains a tripartite sea/earth/heaven formula unique for medieval Polish sources but paralleled by a Germanic earth/heaven/sea formula. The Polish source and example are introduced and the Germanic comparative material is surveyed, including the more widely recognized bipartite earth/heaven (Old Norse *jord/upphiminn*) formula, with some currently unrecognized examples. The strongest parallel is found in the Old Norse *gríðamál*, and the possibility of Scandinavian influence is considered.

The *Chronica Polonorum* ['Chronicle of the Poles'] of Master Vincent, or in Polish Wincenty *Kadłubek* (ca. 1150–1223), preserves a myth of the origins of the town and country of Cracow. This myth is in fact a foundation myth of the whole Polish Kingdom, and it remains well known as a legend and fable in Poland even today. It is written in five chapters (I.3–7) in exquisite and sophisticated Latin. The last of these chapters (I.7) includes a lengthy episode that describes the successful rule of Queen Vanda, in which a German ruler utters a stanza with a charm-like character that opens with the lines:

Vanda mari,
Vanda terrae,
Aeri Vanda imperet,
(*Chronica Polonorum* I.7.)

Let Vanda the sea,
Vanda the earth
the air, Vanda, rule,¹

The tripartite sea/earth/heaven formula in these verses seems to have parallels in Germanic and Celtic traditions, as well as a similar structure being found in the Bible. Surprisingly, the closest analogy that I have found is in the Old Norse juridical text of *gríðamál*. This is an oath confirming the agreement to renounce attacks, which resonates with the context in which the stanza appears in the *Chronica Polonorum*.

Almost a century ago, W.H. Vogt (1936) observed that the oldest version of the *gríðamál* formula is in verses like a kind of *galdr* ['charm, incantation']. The question considered here is: How did such a tripartite formula enter the narrative of the *Chronica Polonorum*?

Master Vincent and His Chronicle

Master Vincent was on good terms with Polish rulers and with Pope Innocent III. In 1208–1218, during the end of his clerical career, he was a bishop of Cracow and participated in the Synode of Lateran in 1215. He retired from bishop dignity in 1218 and then spent the last five years of his life in the Cistersian monastery in Jędrzejów. It is unclear whether he wrote the *Chronica Polonorum* during those final years or prior to becoming a bishop in 1208, but I prefer to assume that the work was written before he was elected bishop.² He undoubtedly lived and worked during the same period that Saxo Grammaticus was writing the *Gesta Danorum* ['History of the Danes'] in the early 13th century.

The content and Master Vincent's narrative strategies both present and construct Polish legendary history, supplemented with a lot of moral learning in line with mediaval pedagogy. Both the style and content of the

narratives are very reminiscent of Saxo's accounts about Denmark and the Scandinavian past. Many years ago, Stella Maria Szacherska (1976) discovered this similarity, and despite differences between the two authors, it is possible to argue that they studied at the same time in the same or similar schools in France. The only significant differences between the works of Master Vincent and Saxo are that the Polish chronicler wrote about Polish rather than Danish legendary history, what he wrote is much shorter, and he tends to add much more moral learning to his stories, with an abundance of direct and indirect quotations of Classical authorities.

Master Vincent's Origin Myth

To summarize *Chronica Polonorum* I.3–7, Master Vincent locates the beginning of the legendary history of Poland in Cracow,³ beginning with the mythical King Krak, Latinized with the name Gracchus. The strategy of dressing national heroes in Roman robes is of course also well known from Saxo's work. To make a long story short, Master Vincent first describes the settlement of Krak and his people as arriving from Carinthia in the Mediterranean to what would be Poland, where the people elected Krak-Gracchus as their first king. As a ruler, Krak established laws and social order. This is followed by episodes describing a fight with a dragon-like monster (but not precisely a dragon!) that occupies the land, tormenting people and making their lives so difficult that the success of the settlement and the building of the town of Cracow was only possible after Krak's sons' victory over the monster. In the *Chronica Polonorum*, the building – i.e. the origin – of the town of Cracow is connected in a very strange way to information about King Krak's burial: the town was built to honour him after his death, and the name *Kraków* obviously derives from *Krak*.

Strangely enough, it is only at that point in the chronicle that the relates the tragic end of Krak the Old's two sons in a struggle for power between them. At the command of their father and king, the brothers went to the fight and slay the monster that was tormenting the people. However, after they accomplish the feat, one brother immediately killed the other. When

this fact was finally discovered, the murderer was swiftly driven out of the country. Nevertheless, the late King Krak also had a daughter, Vanda, who succeeded her father and brothers. Vanda was then elected as the next ruler, not as a queen, however, but as a true king with all of a king's power in her hands – as she was not married. Emphasizing a sense of morality, the subsequent story makes it clear that, in fact, she did not want to marry at all, and that she had no desire to share her royal power with another. A key word found in the account is Latin *imperium*. The word's double meaning may refer to the country Vanda ruled but also to her power to rule: this is a story about power in hands of a great female king, whom we are told was a very strong person and good ruler, successful in war and admired for bringing prosperity to her people. However, by not delivering a successor, she ultimately created a crisis for her people as her death nearly doomed the kingdom.

According to Master Vincent's account, Vanda possessed supernatural power. In this respect, she resembles the three daughters of the Czech hero Krok in the *Chronica Boemorum* ['Chronicle of the Bohemians (i.e. Czechs)'] written by Cosmas of Prague in the early 12th century. In the Czechs' origin myth, Krok is the leader who brings his people to settle in Bohemia and is a transparent counterpart of the Polish King Krak (Ślupecki 1993: 15). Among Krok's daughters, who are presented as witches, the eldest, Kazi, was an herbalist, the second, Thetka, taught people pagan cult practices as a pagan priestess, and the youngest, Lubusa, who was of course the best and most honest – and supposedly the most beautiful – was a diviner-prophetess (*phitonissa*). After the death of her father, Lubusa was elected to rule the country alone.⁴ (Cosmas Pragensis, *Chronica Boemorum* I.3–6.) The name *Vanda* has obviously been invented by Master Vincent, presumably alluding to the Germanic tribe of the Vandals from the Migration Period, who were considered to originate from the territory of future Poland. Nevertheless, the parallel of the daughters of Krok in the Czechs' origin myth make it apparent that this learned name has been transferred to an established mythic

character. In opposition to Vanda, however, when Lubusa was asked by her people to take up this role, she found a husband for herself and a king for the country. Being a seer (*phitonissa*), she used her second sight to find an appropriate person – a ploughman, Premysl – who, in the Bohemian tradition is a legendary founding father of the Premyslids dynasty. Worth mention here is the motif of Lubusa warning her people before complying with their wish that she search for a king. She warns that the true rule of a real king means tyranny and exploitation, but the Czech people still insist on this course. The Czechs' origin myth is a story about the situation as it is expected to be, in contrast to the Cracovian case, which is instead a kind of moral warning about a similar situation. There is no doubt that the legends are connected, and not only because of the similarity (or identity) of the names Krak and Krok, or the presence of very similar female characters.

After Vanda had succeeded her father and brothers and begun ruling in Cracow, one German ruler (literally *lemannorum tyrannus* ['tyrant of the Allemanns']), according to Master Vincent, *quasi vacans rapere molitur imperium* ['tried to capture her *imperium* as though it were vacant']. Although the situation is not described very clearly in the *Chronicle*, it is a story about an unsuccessful (yet malicious) suitor in a kind of bridal-quest narrative (Banaszkiewicz 1984). The suitor is, however, *inaudita quadam virtute orius vincitur quam armis* ['defeated by her unheard-of virtue rather than by arms']. As Master Vincent said at the beginning of this part of the story, Vanda was beautiful and wise, and her wisdom obviously also included witchcraft. Upon merely seeing the Cracovian Queen, or rather female King, the whole army of the 'German tyrant' refused to fight *quodam solis radio percellitur* ['like being knocked down with sunbeams']. The enemy's army was defeated with Vanda's charm – referring to both her witchcraft and her beauty – so efficiently that:

omnes ueluti quodam iussu numinis animos
hostiles exuti a proelio diuertunt, asserunt
sacrilegium a se declinari non proelium, non
hominem se uereri, sed transhumanam in

homine reuereri maiestatem. (*Chronica Polonorum*, I, 7.)

as though following a divine command overcoming their hostility, they refused to fight, declaring that they want to avoid sacrilege, and that they would not fight, not because they do not fear a human being, but because they wish to revere the transhuman majesty in the human [i.e. Vanda's] person.

As a consequence, the German ruler, moved *incertum est amoris an indignatione an utriusque* ['by love or disgrace, or both'], *ait* ['said']:

"Vanda mari,
Vanda terrae,
Aeri Vanda imperet,
diis immortalibus pro suis
Vanda uictimet!

Et ego pro uobis omnibus, proceres,
solempnem inferis hostiam deuoueo, ut tam
uestra quam uestrarum successionem
perpetuas sub femineo consenescat imperio."
Dixit et exerto incumbens mucroni expirat.
(*Chronica Polonorum*, I, 7.)

"Let Vanda the sea,
Vanda the earth
the air, Vanda, rule,
and to immortal gods for her [people],
Vanda, immolate!

And for all of you and all your progeny, my lords, I offer a solemn sacrifice to the infernal gods, in order that you and your successors will grow old under female rule!" He said and threw himself on his drawn blade and expired.

After stabbing himself with his own sword, the unsuccessful suitor also solemnly acknowledged the power of Vanda as ruling over all the basic elements of the universe – i.e. the sea/earth/heaven – and that what she was doing brings offerings to the gods and use of her supernatural power. On the other hand, the German tyrant curses his army by making an offering of himself for his own army in order to bring them under female rule and, in that cruel way, to punish the army which betrayed him (Kumaniecki 1925–1926: esp. 49). In fact, when Vanda appeared before them, the army immediately acknowledged her power!

Some scholars suppose that the German ruler's suicide takes on an exact counterpart in

a corresponding self-sacrifice by Vanda – i.e. they have interpreted the words *pro suis Vanda victimet* [‘Vanda, immolate for hers’] as a curse on Vanda, who should offer herself to the gods in reciprocation for victory. Although this is completely wrong, Master Vincent’s text has been understood thus by authors of all subsequent Polish Chroniclers (and all Polish modern historiography!), creating a story about a patriotic queen who defends the country and sacrifices herself for the Fatherland. But this story is not Master Vincent’s! As I have discussed elsewhere, a counterpart suicide to that of her antagonist that first appears in the 14th-century *Chronica Poloniae Maioris* (I.1), where Vanda drowns herself in the waves of the Vistula River. In the 15th century, the German ruler received the name Rithogarus and, as J. Banaszkiwicz (1984) has observed, the story absorbs more elements from German bridal quest narratives. It is also only after the 14th century that one of the large burial mounds over Cracow begins to be connected to the myth, becoming *Kopiec Wandy* [‘Wandas Mound’] and regarded as her burial place. (See Ślupecki 2005.) In Master Vincent’s account, Vanda rules (*imperat*) for a very long time. After her victory over this tyrant, Vanda goes on to defeat even Alexander the Great himself (*Chronica Polonorum* I.9–10). In the end, *quia [...] connubio protulerat celibatum* [‘because she [...] preferred to live alone over matrimony’], she died *sine succesore decessit* [‘without any successor’] *diuque post ipsam sine rege claudicauit imperium* [‘and for a long time after her rule, the empire was without a king’], which forms a moral of the story.

Comparative Evidence for the Sea/Earth/Heaven Formula

The sea/earth/heaven formula in German tyrant’s charm is unique in Polish medieval sources. Gerard Labuda had previously suspected some links to Scandinavia, and potentially even to skaldic poetry, although he could not find an analogy (1988: 30–42). No parallel in skaldic verse is known to me, yet Labuda was on the right track. The best analogy is found in Old Icelandic juridical texts, as I pointed out already 25 years ago (Ślupecki 1995), when I discovered that the

German scholar W.H. Vogt (1936a; 1936b), already 90 years ago, had analyzed a similar formula in the Old Icelandic lawbook *Grágás*. The respective formula is to be spoken for *griðamál*, a ceremony of reconciliation between two sides in quarrel. Both sides should swear a *griðr*, literally ‘a peace’, which in this context means ‘an agreement to renounce the violence’. *Grágás* then presents the text that should be spoken by the man who performs the agreement. (*Grágás, Baugatal*, ch. 2, p. 456.) However, Vogt (1936b: 326) argued that another text of *griðamál*, published in the *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, includes an older version of the formula. What is certain is that the latter version is in verse, increasing its character as a kind of *galdr*, and it also includes a tripartite earth/heaven/sea formula and a curse. In the version in the *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, the following text should be spoken on concluding the *griðr*:

[...] set ek grið eptir handlagi þeirra ok skilorði:

Jorð raeðr griðum fyr neðan
en upphimin (fyrir ofan)
en siór fyrir utan
sa er kringir um oll lond.

En sa er þessi griðr heldr eigi, þrífiz hvergi milli þessara takmarka ok heiti griðniðingr. (*Diplomatarium Islandicum*, vol.2, p. 659; cf. Vogt 1936b: 326.)

[...] I set up the peace after they join hands and with the stipulation:

The earth rule the agreement from beneath,
and the high heaven from above
and the sea from all around
which encircles all land.

Let those who do not hold this agreement find prosperity nowhere between these borders and be called a truce-breaker.

The formula defines the reach of the agreement’s validity through the bounds of the universe as the earth, heaven and sea (Vogt 1936b: 331). Master Vincent defines the limits of Vanda’s power in a similar way, although in a different order, by the sea, earth and heaven. It may be asked to what degree the Old Norse *upphiminn* [‘higher heaven’] is the same as Latin *aer*, yet *aer* and *upphiminn* mark the celestial limit in both cases.

As already stressed by Vogt (1936: 331), this type of tripartite formula is rare in Germanic sources, where usually only earth and heaven are paired. Lars Lönnroth (1981: 313), Rudolf Simek (2003: 173) and Michael Schulte (2007: 61; 2018: 201) have collected examples of that bipartite structure from the Old Norse *Völuspá* (st. 3), *Vafþrúðnismál* (st. 20), *Þrymskviða* (st. 2), *Oddrúnagrátr* (st. 17), Old High German *Wessobrunner Gebet*, Old Saxon *Heliand* (2885–2886), Old English *Andreas* (798), *Christ* (967–968), *Psalm 121.2* and a magic charm, and also on from the Swedish runestone in Skarpåker and the Ribe rune stick. Lönnroth argued that the earth/heaven bipartite structure belongs to the myth of creation – to which I would here add: like in the Bible – but that there is also an earth/sea alternative, here, there and in many other creation myths in the world. The alliterative *jord/upphiminn* formula appears in mythological descriptions of the creation and, according to Lönnroth, it was also used for ‘magic’ purposes when:

the speaker invokes the holy cosmic powers [...] to give him the strength necessary to perform an act of magic [...] thought [...] as an act of exorcism, whereby nature is cleansed from evil spirits and restored to health, fecundity and usefulness. (Lönnroth 1981: 325.)

In poetic use, the earth/heaven formula appears when “the text deals with the arrival of a great hero or god [...] in a world other than his own” (Lönnroth 1981: 322):

[This] arrival should imply a threat to the natural order and ultimately the complete destruction of the world (Ragnarök, Judgment Day). The arrival implies that heaven and earth are roaring/trembling/cracking [...]. (Lönnroth 1981: 322.)

Such a binary structure is, however, incomplete as compared to the Cracovian sea/earth/air formula and the earth/air/sea formula of *gríðamál*. The sea “which encircles all land” – to quote *gríðamál* – is also an important cosmological element known very well in Old Norse mythology. Lönnroth did not include the formula from *gríðamál*. He quoted the *Wessobrunner Gebet* (Lönnroth 1981: 313), where the three elements appear, as well as *Vafþrúðnismál*, but did not stress that such

a tripartite structure also appears in arguably its best example in the third stanza of *Völuspá*, describing the chaos before the gods create the universe:

Ár var alda
þat er Ymir bygði,
var sandr né saer
né svalar unnir;
iorð fannz aeva
né upphiminn,
gap var ginnunga,
en gras hvergi.
(*Völuspá* 3.)

At (before) the beginning of time, there, when Ymir dwelled, was sand nor sea nor chill waves; earth was found nowhere, nor high heaven, the void was yawning, and grass nowhere (cf. Klaus von See et al. 2019: 86).

Here the sea (*saer*) / earth (*jord*) / high heaven (*upphiminn*) formula is somewhat dispersed across the verses and supplemented with elements representing the world of the earth (or sea floor? – *sandr*) and sea (*svalar unnir*); no concrete example is given only from heaven.

Vafþrúðnismál 21 speaks about the creation of the world from the primordial giant Ymir’s corpse – very much in harmony with other Indo-European cosmogonies beginning from the Vedic sources. Here, following Óðinn’s questions about the origins of the world in the form of the bipartite formula *Segðu [...] hvaðan iorð um kom eða uphiminn [...]* (st. 20) [‘Tell [...] whence came the earth or high heaven’], *Vafþrúðnir*’s answer echoes this with a tripartite structure:

Ór Ymis holdi
var iorð um scopuð,
enn ór beinom biorg,
himmin ór hausi
ins hrímkada iotuns,
en um sveita síor.
(*Vafþrúðnismál* 21.)

From Ymir’s flesh the earth was crated, but the mountains form his bones, heaven from rime-cold giants skull, and the sea from his blood.

Funnily enough, a somewhat similar situation is found in the Bible, where Genesis 1 first presents a bipartite creation of the earth and heaven, and then adds the third element in the following sentence: *In principio creavit Deus caelum et terram. Terra autem erat inanis et*

vacua et tenebrae erant super faciem abyssi; et Spiritus Dei ferebat super aquas. [‘In the beginning God created heaven and earth. And the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God moved over the waters.’]

The earth/heaven structure is indeed more frequent in Germanic texts, but the tripartite structure is also recorded in some other important sources. Some less well-known examples are found in German laws from the High Middle Ages. For example, in the 15th-century *Ordnung des Kampfrechten am Landgericht der Franken*, the corpse of an outlaw was dedicated in damnation formula (*maledictio*) to *den thieren in den walden, den vogeln in den luften und den fischen in dem wage [...]*(following Siuts 1959: 127) [‘the animals in the woods, the birds in the air and the fish in the waves’], with additional examples from the 14th through the 16th century surveyed by Hinrich Suits (1959: 127–129). It thus seems there were (at least) two cosmical structures in Old Norse mythology described in the respective formulas.

The tripartite earth/heaven/sea formula is also known from Irish sources and appears many times in the *Tain Bo Cuailinge* epic, and also brings to the mind cosmological or even eschatological events of heaven falling, the sea moving horribly with the floating the earth, and of the earth breaking and opening; the formula appears in connection to the deeds of a great hero Conchobar (*Tain Bo Cuailinge*, pp. 666, 676–677, 862–864; Vogt 1936b: 331–333; Ślupecki 1995:163–165).

Conclusion

Returning to the tripartite formula from Cracow, the formula’s usage is of particular interest for comparison. The Germanic formula is not simply linked to the cosmological structure; it was used in ritual speech to demarcate inclusion in, or exclusion from, the whole of the created universe, paralleling that found in Master Vincent’s *Chronica Polonorum*. Gerard Labuda (1988) proposed that the Old Norse formula could have reached Cracow through Germany. This is of course possible, yet there is no reason that it could not have simply come from Germany, which indeed seems more likely than a

hypothesis of an Icelandic juridical formula being used in Cracow at the beginning of 13th century. But there remains a possibility of some Scandinavian link, a link that would be in alignment with the strange similarity between the narrative strategies, ways of Latinizing the proper names of local heroes and, generally speaking, the similarity in the Latin language used by Master Vincent and Saxo Grammaticus. The two authors, Danish and Polish, may have known one another, spoken together and exchanged ideas. On many occasions, Polish historiography has noticed *en passant* the similarities between the works of Saxo Grammaticus and Master Vincent, which in fact demand a new and in-depth study. On the other hand, there is also the possibility of seeing a much broader background to the tripartite formula, which can be viewed against not only Germanic and Celtic cosmogony, but also that of the Bible.

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Notes

1. All translations are by the present author unless otherwise noted.
2. For current research on Master Vincent’s *Chronicle*, see Dąbrówka & Wojtowicz 2009.
3. Thus in Little Poland (Małopolska), whereas the first Polish chronicler, known as Gallus Anonymous and who was writing about a century earlier, located it in Gniezno in Polonia Maior (Wielkopolska). Gallus focuses on the local tradition of the tribe of the Polanians and the royal dynasty of Piasts that descend from them. Master Vincent, considered the second Polish chronicler, focuses on the tradition of a different region, where the center of the kingdom was already located during his lifetime, and where the new royal capital, which had been in Cracow since the mid-11th century, was by then firmly established.
4. *Omnia nostra et nos ipsi in tua manu sumus, te ducem, te iudicem, te rectorem, te protectorem, te solum nobis in dominum eligimus* [‘We and all that is ours are in your hands; we only choose you as our guide, you as our judge, you as our ruler, you as our protector, you as our master’] (Cosmas Pragensis, *Chronica Boemorum* I.3–6, p. 16).

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