

## Challenging or Confirming the National Sacred?

Managing the Power Place at Wawel Hill in Kraków

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### Introduction

Wawel Hill—in Polish usually simply called Wawel—is a limestone plateau, surfacing seven and a half hectares (eighteen and a half acres) and picturesquely overlooking the Kraków’s Old Town, with the Vistula River widely bending on its west side.<sup>1</sup> Since the early history of Polish statehood, which goes back to the tenth and eleventh centuries, Wawel has been dominated by the princely (and later royal) residential building and the Roman Catholic cathedral (see Carter 1994: 5). For ten centuries, these two edifices—changing and developing their material form—have overlooked the city. Today Wawel Hill, with its castle and cathedral, creates the city’s picturesque landmark. Poles regard Wawel as “the most sacred monument of national heritage” (Kubik 1994: 95), since it is connected with the history of the Polish state and the formation of the modern national identity during the nineteenth century (Purchla 2018: 64). The cathedral is recognized as an important Catholic shrine—one of the oldest pilgrimage centers in the country (Witkowska 1984: 78; Jackowski 1999: 139). It also serves as the “Polish Pantheon”—a national necropolis with historic royal sarcophagi and tombs of national heroes and poets (Nungovitch 2019). In 1978, as part of the “Historic Centre of Kraków,” Wawel was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 and the opening of Poland to a free-market economy and an expanding international tourist industry, Wawel has been promoted as a “must-see” attraction and has become the most visited tourist place in the country (Kruczek 2014: 30).<sup>2</sup>

Situating this chapter within the range of questions proposed by the editors of this volume, I treat Wawel as an example of a national-religious heritage site where one can observe various ways in which heritage is managed through both top-down and bottom-up processes (see introduction to this volume). The concept of heritage regime is a useful starting point here, as it turns our attention toward the processual and multidimensional character of heritage, its relations with power dynamics, politics, economy, and identity (Geismar 2015: 72). Haidy Geismar also indicates the complex role of institutions (including the nation-state) in “mediating and producing heritage, both as a form of governance and as an experiential domain for citizens on the ground” (2015: 72). Drawing on this perspective, I aim to demonstrate that what is called and experienced as “heritage” at Wawel should be seen as an effect of official power relations, cultural politics, and institutionally implemented managerial strategies, as well as the result of a constant cultural production that refers to people’s interactions with both: heritage discourses and a particular space and its material form. “Experiential domain on the ground” or, to use another phrase, “an experiential way of knowing” (van de Port and Meyer 2018: 4) is, as Geismar points out, strongly shaped by institutional regimes that control visitors’ movements, influence guides’ narratives, design the layout of exhibitions and select their contents, or even create a particular ambience in heritage spaces to trigger distinct emotional responses. Indeed, two managerial institutions that share a stewardship over Wawel—namely, the Royal Castle state museum and the Royal Cathedral Chapter—play a central role in these processes. Using official narratives and designing visitors’ practices, they cultivate a national and Catholic-oriented conceptualization of Wawel and its heritage (see Nungovitch 2019). Even in discourses aimed at foreigners, Wawel is depicted as the “essence of Polishness,” and references to cosmopolitan, UNESCO-endorsed “universal values” are rather rare. The castle is promoted as a symbol of the history of the Polish statehood. It is also depicted as intimately connected to the cathedral as a place of royal coronations and burials (up to the eighteenth century). The cathedral is publicized as both a religious and national shrine, where national identity is expressed through Catholic symbols.

It is important to understand that due to the specific historical trajectory of east central Europe, Poles (like some other nations in the region) developed a modern national ideology in the absence of an independent nation-state (Johnson 1996: 134–36). Since Poland was partitioned between 1795 and 1918 by Russia, Prussia, and Austria, Polish identity was expressed not through state symbols and rituals, but through religious—mostly Catholic—ones (Zubrzycki 2010: 613). In the Polish case, the concept of “the migration of the holy”—originally coined by historians to describe the trajectory of many Western nation-states and then applied by social scientists in the

secularization thesis (see Isnart and Cerezales 2020: 2)—does not seem very suitable because nationalism and Catholicism were seen as two sides of the same coin. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the fusion of “national identity and Catholicism” (Zubrzycki 2010: 613) served as basis for “Christian patriotism” (Kotwas and Kubik 2019: 440) and the ideal of the “Pole-Catholic” (see Porter-Szücs 2011: 328). Even though in the last three decades these concepts have been questioned and debated in the quite polarized postcommunist Polish political and social scene, the official management of Wawel—as the most important national heritage site—remains strongly entangled with religious meanings as defined by institutional Catholicism. Wawel can be analyzed then as a “religious heritage complex” (Isnart and Cerezales 2020) where relations between what is perceived as “religion” and “heritage” are “far more complicated, intricate, and multi-layered” than suggested by a religio-secularism paradigm (6). Additionally, affordances of space and its material dimension need to be taken into account as active components constructing Wawel as a “religious heritage complex” where “religious” and “heritage” realms are rather enmeshed than separated (2). For instance, the physical proximity of the cathedral and the castle, due to the specific topography of Wawel, naturalizes the fusion of religious and national associations. The Catholic life of the cathedral, where sarcophagi and memorabilia of the royals are exhibited in a context of explicitly religious art and rituals, corresponds with the interiors of the neighboring castle, where the same royals are recalled through museum objects that refer to their governing power and the history of the Polish statehood.

While acknowledging the deep entanglement between the concept of a national heritage site and the Catholic aura of the cathedral, I will, however, go beyond analyzing the dominant heritage regime promoted by the state and church institutions that share stewardship over Wawel. My focus in this chapter will be on alternative discourses and bottom-up holistic spiritual practices that associate Wawel with one of the “Earth’s chakras”—a sacred spot and energy knot, believed to radiate mystical and healing powers. This contemporary alternative spirituality is linked with rather unorthodox and heterogeneous narratives about Wawel as well as energy practices that are performed publicly at the very center of the hill. The focus will be on how these narratives and practices influence, change, promote, but also eventually—through a bottom-up experiential domain—manage what is perceived as “heritage” at Wawel as the most important Polish national heritage site.

First, I will turn toward the managers of the hill and analyze how the emergence of chakra spirituality and the physical location of the energy practices at Wawel were seen by the castle and the cathedral officials as a challenge to the institutionally canonized and cherished concept of a national heritage site. I will also show that the behaviors and narratives associated with

the chakra were seen as a challenge to the dominant Christian notion of the sacred. Second, I aim to go beyond these conflicting discourses and see the chakra development as a new interpretation and a bottom-up form of managing the concept of the national heritage site. This form attempts to navigate beyond the official control surrounding Wawel and is applied on the ground by a range of people—Kraków tour guides as well as individuals who seek to access the Wawel chakra energy. I will refer to the latter as “the Wawel chakra energy drawers,” since this denotes simply “those who draw energy at Wawel” and directly refers to how it is expressed in Polish.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter draws on ethnographic research conducted mostly between September 2018 and February 2020 that included participant observation at the Wawel chakra site, many informal discussions in the castle courtyard with people drawing energy as well as with casual visitors, and in-depth ethnographic interviews with the regular chakra energy drawers and Kraków tour guides.<sup>4</sup> I also refer to the few publications that have popularized the chakra story among a broader public within Poland. These books were written in the form of popular historical publications on sensational topics. The first publications that made chakra popular among a broader public were authored by a historian, Michał Rożek (1991), and a journalist, Zbigniew Świąch (2000). There is very little social scientific scholarly interest in the chakra and its believers. I should mention here an article by the Cracovian ethnologist Róża Godula-Węclawowicz (2008) based on her observations of the chakra energy drawing practices around the turn of the millennium, as well as few rather popular and very general publications published by scholars connected with Kraków’s Historical Museum.<sup>5</sup>

Like bottom-up spiritual beliefs, knowledge about the chakra has spread mostly through word of mouth and—more recently—through the internet. It is impossible to point to one “canonical version” of beliefs and practices related to the chakra, since people who draw energy are very diverse and build their own concepts and theories. In the following section, I will present the most significant aspects of chakra beliefs and practices as they appeared during ethnographic research. However, it needs to be stressed that due to the scarcity of space and the specific scope of this chapter, I am unable to focus more exhaustively on the fluidity, creativity, and individualization of chakra beliefs and practices or explore the complexity of the dynamics between various energy drawers.

## Energy Spirituality

The Wawel chakra—by some also referred to as the Wawel stone or the magnetic Earth gland—is said to be located at the center of the hill, between the

castle and the cathedral. The word “chakra” refers to a Sanskrit term as well as Hindu and Buddhist ideas about energetic centers located in the human body. The term is also widely adopted in a variety of Western holistic, esoteric, and syncretic spiritual movements. It describes not only energetic centers in the human body, but also—as in the case of Wawel—energetic centers connected with particular geographic locations. The Earth’s chakras, like other “power places,” are said to create “a worldwide web formed by energy lines spanning across the globe” (Fedele 2018: 112). Wawel, as a site where one of the Earth’s chakras is believed to be located, is seen as part of a global transnational and trans-religious energetic network that includes such famous sacred places as Mecca, Jerusalem, Rome, Glastonbury, and Giza.

Every day for almost forty years the Wawel chakra energy drawers have visited a courtyard at the Wawel castle in order to connect with the chakra energy. The wide Renaissance arcaded courtyard is one of the most iconic sites at Wawel, and tourists stop here on their way to the castle’s exhibitions or simply stroll leisurely, making pictures and admiring the harmonious design of the historic royal residence. The energy drawers can usually be spotted performing their practices in the northwest corner of the courtyard, under an arcade, where an exit from the castle exhibition, a luggage room, and a souvenir shop are located. An approximately fifteen-meter-long section of the wall is believed to be a spot where the strongest energy waves—emanating from the chakra—are felt. Here people lean toward the wall, many with closed eyes and deeply concentrating. They touch the wall with their backs or foreheads, sometimes stretch their arms along the wall, or stroke it with their open palms and fingers to draw more energy (see Figure 5.1). Some people stand barefoot on the pavement; others sit by the wall in a lotus position and meditate. I also heard stories about individuals who bring items and touch them on the wall to “catch the energy” (e.g., postcards, scraps of paper), a woman who performed rituals that included a Tibetan singing bowl, someone who “charged” water bottles with the chakra energy, and a student who in the 1980s brought his typewriter to the wall to get energetic support when writing his master’s thesis. Often, those who visit the Wawel chakra spot search for physical or emotional healing and individual empowerment.

The chakra beliefs absorb various, sometimes very complex and even contradictory theories. For instance, they include alternative interpretations of Polish and Slavic history (usually relating to pre-Christian and Pagan traditions; see also the chapter by Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska in this volume), esoteric and oriental spiritualities, natural healing and ecological holistic approaches, elements from various established religious traditions (e.g., Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Paganism), and scientific discourses on physics, astronomy, etc. The fluid and heterogeneous character of theories and practices related to the chakra resembles other con-



**Figure 5.1.** Drawing energy at the roped-off wall at the Wawel castle courtyard, September 2016. © Anna Niedźwiedź.

temporary spiritual movements, especially popular in western Europe and North America and described by scholars in terms of “religious creativity” (Weibel 2001), “invented religions” (Cusack 2010), “holistic spirituality” (Harris 2013), “alternative spirituality” (Fedele 2013), or more recently “energy pilgrims” (Fedele 2018).<sup>6</sup> The term “energy pilgrims” is particularly helpful, since it points to the concept of energy as central and shared within these multifaceted and fluctuating contemporary spiritual currents. Energy ties various spiritual narratives together through an inclusive, transnational, and trans-religious “energy grammar” (a term proposed by Anna Fedele) offering “a language that goes beyond religious affiliation” (Fedele 2018: 114). “Energy grammar” seemingly responds to “a desire for a more malleable notion of the divine” (114) than in conventional religious contexts and operates beyond established traditional institutional mainstream religiosity.

Energy is also central for individual spiritual practices. In the case of the Wawel chakra, energy creates an intimate relation between people’s bodies and an exact location at the hill and its material tissue. Many people who touch the wall at the Wawel castle courtyard to draw energy from the chakra describe their experiences as physical sensations felt inside their bodies (e.g., “a wave going through the spine,” “tingling in foot or fingers,” “warm feeling,” “something similar to an electric current going through the body”). Usually, direct physical contact with the chakra energy is perceived as a sig-

nificant, sometimes powerful, and even transformative personal experience. It creates intimate bonds between individuals and Wawel, perceived as a concrete geographic location.<sup>7</sup>

I suggest that this bottom-up, noninstitutional, alternative, and hardly controllable type of relations between the chakra energy drawers and Wawel should be interpreted as belonging to what Geismar calls the “experiential domain on the ground” (2015: 72), because it has an impact on the production and perception of Wawel as a heritage site. Although silenced by institutional management strategies, and for many years officially resisted by the museum and condemned by the cathedral, the chakra energy drawers have been persistently present and visible at the very center of the hill since at least the early 1980s. As I will reveal in the final part of this chapter, for many of the energy drawers, the chakra beliefs and practices are not at odds with official national and Catholic heritage discourses about Wawel. Similarly, outside the officially promoted heritage narrative, the chakra stories confirm the outstanding value, sacrality, and uniqueness of Wawel as an important Polish historic site. However, at the same time, the energy drawers’ use of “energy grammar” opens the hill up to a transcultural and trans-religious network of beliefs and theories. The chakra introduces a contemporary global spirituality to the experiential domain of the most important Polish national heritage site and indicates its more universal and cosmopolitan dimensions.

## **Powers over the Place of Power**

In this section, I will present the objections that the castle and the cathedral management have against the energy spirituality developing at Wawel. To do so, I will return to events that happened almost twenty years ago, when on 25 May 2001 the “war” against the chakra was openly proclaimed. On that morning, before the first visitors would walk into the courtyard, metal poles and a thick rope were placed in the northwest corner, blocking access to the wall. The appearance of this spatial arrangement was clarified in an official announcement—printed out and placed on a big stand near the rope—and signed by representatives of the castle and the cathedral.

To evaluate the significance of the proclaimed message, it is necessary to make a short digression concerning the management structure of Wawel. As mentioned, the castle and the cathedral share the stewardship over the entirety of Wawel and are devoted to the promotion of a national and Catholic-oriented vision of its heritage. However, the collaborative action directed against the chakra drawing, performed in the area of the hill officially managed by the castle, was rather unusual given the managerial divisions

between the two institutions. On a daily basis the castle and the cathedral manage their own parts of the hill separately, especially when organizing visitors' access. For instance, the castle sells tickets to all the exhibitions that are part of the Royal Castle state museum and are scattered all over the hill, while the church manages ticketing of tourists who visit the cathedral and the adjacent Cathedral Museum.

The lines between the two bodies are clear and connected with land ownership. Most of the hill is state-owned and managed by the castle museum. The section owned by the Roman Catholic Church is concentrated on the northern embankments and is managed by the Cathedral Board. Apart from the cathedral, these properties include a few other historic buildings, which are home to the Cathedral Museum, the Cathedral Archive, and the residence that accommodates some of the canons belonging to the Cathedral Chapter. To some extent, however, the church properties fall under the control of the museum. Due to their status as national monuments and as an integral part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Wawel Hill conservator, who has a state-funded position at the castle museum, is in charge of approving any maintenance or alteration of the church-owned buildings.

The announcement and spatial arrangement that blocked access to the wall of the courtyard was, therefore, an exceptional top-down managerial act initiated by two institutions that were united in opposing the beliefs and practices associated with the chakra. It seems that the bottom-up, trans-religious, and heterogeneous spirituality developing at Wawel challenged established power dynamics and was seen as an ideological threat to a heritage regime authorized by the state and religious institutions in conjunction. As I will demonstrate, several expressions used in the announcement are crucial for interpreting Wawel as the religious heritage complex where national understanding of heritage is fused with references to a religious realm represented by Catholicism.

The announcement went as follows (layout and emphasis as in the original):

Management Board of the Royal Wawel Castle and the Board of the Kraków's Cathedral  
warn against believing in rumors  
about the existence of a miraculous stone (chakra) at Wawel Hill.  
These rumors are not based on any scholarly or religious premises.

We are informing people that

- at Wawel Hill no extraordinary powers exist, especially none of those that would be able to have any positive influence on the psychological or physical condition of a human being;



- performing occult practices is incompatible with the grandeur of Wawel Hill; Wawel Hill is a special place related to the highest historic and religious values;
- participation in occult practices is contrary to the principles of the Catholic faith.

We cordially ask you not to gather at the courtyard's arcade, as this causes trouble by stopping the flow of tourists and leads toward the dilapidation of an ancient castle's wall.

According to the text, Wawel is a place whose significance is related to both “the highest historic and religious values,” where “religious” is clearly defined as “the Catholic faith.” The further reasoning follows this twofold pattern. The museum seems to be in charge of scholarly, reason-based, and rationalizing arguments against “rumors” about the existence of the chakra and any “extraordinary powers.” The authority of the Roman Catholic Church is used as a decisive tool to draw a clear line between the chakra-related activities and religion. In this context it is worth pointing out that the word “rumors” appears twice, as does the phrase “occult practices” (described as “contrary to the principles of the Catholic faith”). Both expressions clearly seek to discredit the energy practices as neither “scholarly” nor “religious.” Of a different character, yet of equal relevance, is the final argument about “the dilapidation of an ancient castle's wall.” This practical argument directly relates to the efficient management of people's movement at a popular tourist place as well as to concerns about how to preserve the material tissue of this valuable heritage site, suggesting that by touching and leaning against the wall the energy drawers make it dirty and could possibly even damage the historic monument. This argument insists that the chakra practices at Wawel are out of place and do not fit within the museum regimes and “normal” behaviors in a heritage site, especially one possessing such a high national and religious (Catholic) importance.

The announcement and new spatial arrangement at the castle courtyard not only unpleasantly surprised those who visited Wawel on that May morning with the aim of drawing energy at the wall, but also made it to the local and national news. In the days and weeks that followed, the media pondered over Wawel energy, usually giving some general information about the chakra beliefs and commenting on the dispute. While some newspapers reported that “in the name of rationalism and faith the director of the Royal Castle at Wawel Hill and the parish priest of the Wawel Cathedral blocked people from accessing the wall,”<sup>8</sup> others wondered “why the managers of Wawel decided to slaughter a hen laying golden eggs” and “resign from this huge tourist attraction.”<sup>9</sup> Comparisons with other globally famous “energy places” appeared, and even the Loch Ness monster was recalled as an example of a successful marketing strategy that Wawel managers should learn from in order to attract tourists. Even though most of the news described

energy spirituality rather indulgently, the media cover of the 2001 chakra dispute made the Wawel chakra nationally famous.

Paradoxically, in the end rather than stopping the energy spirituality, the managerial operation conducted by the castle and the cathedral stirred a growing interest in the chakra. Over the summer of 2001 many casual tourists asked about the chakra when visiting Wawel and tried to gain access to the wall. The regular energy drawers did not give up their practices either. When stopped by the castle guards and kept away from the roped-off wall, they drew energy by leaning against other walls nearby or simply sat in the courtyard. As a result, the Wawel managers reformulated their restrictive measures, hoping that the fame of the chakra would weaken with the passing of time. They removed the controversial announcement but retained the rope and poles. Additionally, large stands partially covering the wall were installed, creating an open-air exhibition dedicated to the history of the castle restoration.

Nevertheless, the energy drawers and tourists regularly violated the rope not only by stretching their hands over it and touching the wall with their palms, but also by jumping over the rope and performing the energy drawing practices directly at the wall. Over the following months, the managers



**Figure 5.2.** A group of tourists at the northwest corner of the Wawel castle courtyard and a person sitting and performing his meditation at the chakra spot. Next to him are the exhibition stands, rope, chain, and poles erected by the museum managers around the chakra site, June 2019. © Anna Niedźwiedź.

started to turn a blind eye to these practices, keeping the rope at the wall but not chasing away those who did not respect it. Hence, it soon became quite usual to see a castle guard walking along the rope but not reprimanding those who jumped over it to draw energy directly from the wall. In recent years, when we were doing our research at the courtyard, the castle guards were usually not even present in the vicinity of the chakra site. If they happened to pass by, they either observed the energy drawers with some sort of curiosity but without any reprimands or simply pretended not to see them. When the guards were accosted by tourists searching for the chakra spot—a situation I observed a few times at the courtyard—they gave rather evasive replies saying that “they know nothing” and avoided any closer involvement with people eager to draw energy. In practice, in recent years not “war” but a “ceasefire” prevailed at the castle courtyard, with energy drawers continuing their activities usually undisturbed by representatives of the museum.

The 2001 chakra dispute and events that followed revealed that controlling the place of power is much more complex than what was assumed at the institutional level. The top-down vision by the management of Wawel as “a special place related to the highest historic and religious values,” as stated in the announcement, was confronted by bottom-up practices and projections of meanings that did not fit the officially promoted national and Catholic-oriented heritage regime. The uses of Wawel by the energy drawers were seen by the managers as abuses of a national heritage site. Nevertheless, the chakra appeared to resonate well with a broader audience and attracted new practitioners and tourists, who were not stopped by roping off the chakra wall.

## **Managing Tour Guides**

As sweeping away the chakra followers from the castle courtyard appeared to be rather like tilting at windmills, the museum managers decided to target another potential category of persons: the city tour guides. The tourist industry that boomed in Kraków in the 1990s led to the emergence of a thriving city tour guide community. In the last thirty years, many people found employment in the tourist sector and have treated guiding as their main source of income. Until 2014, Kraków had a very strict licensing policy for all tour guides—only state-licensed guides were allowed to lead walking tours through the city and visit various tourist attractions with groups. Gaining a license meant a significant time-consuming and expensive effort involving a several hundred hours’ course, which consisted of lectures (mostly dedicated to the history of Kraków and Poland and art history) and practical classes in various museums, followed by a rather challenging state exam.

Tour guides who had gained their licenses before the 2014 act that opened up the profession<sup>10</sup> recall that they were warned during courses dedicated specifically to Wawel and led by the museum not to tell the chakra story to visitors. If guides were overheard at the Wawel courtyard referring to the chakra—even as a legend or local titbit—they could lose their license or at least be permanently banned from taking groups into the courtyard.

For years the most audible mouthpiece advocating institutional hostility toward the chakra was the Royal Castle museum director, a renowned professor of art history who held this post from 1989 until the end of 2019, when he retired. His public comments on the chakra followed the announcement he signed in May 2001 and were without exception aggressively negative. He usually referred to the chakra in a very cursory manner, describing it as a “rumor,” “superstition,” or “rubbish” and not even worth mentioning any further. In 2012, in one of the newspaper’s interviews dedicated to his broader policy as the director of the museum, he focused on the grandeur of Wawel and positioned it within the context of Polish national identity and history. In his opinion, the Royal Castle museum served, first of all, as “a symbol of Polish statehood.” When he was asked by the journalist about the chakra, he called it “a pseudoscience that damages Wawel’s reputation and compromises us.”<sup>11</sup> In his opinion, the chakra did not fit with a heritage site, which is represented through the ideals of “high culture,” “art,” and a “national past” for Polish and international visitors. Interestingly, the museum director did not even acknowledge the chakra story as “a legend.” “Dragon yes, the chakra no!” was his usual response. Here he was referring to the “old legends,” that is, the story about the Wawel dragon that was written down in a thirteenth-century chronicle. For him, the chakra was “new rubbish,” a story created in the twentieth century that had nothing to do with legends or heritage.

Quite a different attitude toward the chakra emerges from the ethnographic material collected among tour guides. In interviews many of them pointed out that “the chakra is already a part of Wawel,” hence it cannot be expunged. One tour guide described it as follows:

I myself felt outraged about the ban on mentioning the chakra during tours. If people ask me, it means that they have heard something about the chakra and want to know more. So, it is my duty as a tour guide to relate the story! Of course, it is important to explain that scholars do not take the chakra seriously, but that there are people who believe in it, and so on. But banning it totally? It was outrageous! If one manages such a place as Wawel one needs to tolerate this kind of legends and customs. They have a function here. Wawel is a “cult place,” and I do not mean only “religious cult,” but it is a sort of a broader “cult place,” for our broader culture. One cannot ban things like that, cannot ignore them. If people talk about it, transmit the story, we cannot ignore it. (Interview, 16 December 2019)

Since professional licenses were opened up during 2014, tour guides have been freed from submitting to the museum's rules. However, many still do not refer to the chakra story and its location when leading tourists around the castle courtyard. One guide explained that it is not only due to the negative attitude of the museum, but also due to the scarcity of time. "It is simply not possible to talk about everything when I typically have only one or two hours with a group to see Wawel—the cathedral and the castle—and after that we run to visit the Old Town" (interview, 18 December 2019). So, as this guide points out, priority is usually given to historical narratives about "kings, coronations, and graves." They are seen as "more serious" and more crucial stories to be narrated at "the national heritage site" within the limited time spent on the visit.

However, the chakra might appear in the guides' narratives during the Wawel tours through spontaneous interaction with a group. Usually, the topic is initiated by a question from those visitors who have already heard or read about the chakra. Additionally, questions emerge when tourists see some energy drawers performing their practices at the wall. The guides we talked with admitted that the majority of tourists are positively curious about the chakra, and many visitors upon hearing the story decide to stop for a few minutes to touch the wall and "feel the energy" themselves. Some treat these practices as a tourist attraction and are surprised that the story is not marketed more widely. Many tourists make selfies when touching the wall and loudly comment about "the energy," while others try to focus, close their eyes, and approach the spot with a serious look and comment on the "healing waves" they are feeling.

These usually very short stops at the chakra wall are sometimes managed by tour guides in a telling way. For instance, one guide described how she used to recall the chakra story when her group seemed to be tired or bored by a solemn narrative about Wawel:

Especially when I bring schoolchildren and I see that they are tired, I make a break here and encourage them to touch the wall and draw energy to have enough strength for further visiting. They start interacting, feel curious, there is some laughter and comments, and they wake up. The same with adult visitors. For instance, when I see that my group has drunk too much alcohol last night, I tell them the chakra story and we joke that touching the wall can help them with a hangover. (Interview, 6 December 2019)

Another guide commented in a similar manner, treating the chakra as a handy tool to catch the visitors' attention because "this is such an interesting legend, much lighter and it is something different than all this grand history of Wawel" (interview, 18 December 2019).

Hence, the tour guides, who work on the ground and interact with various visitors, provide quite a different perspective on Wawel than the one promoted by the castle managers. In anthropological literature, tour guides have been described as pathfinders, animators, mediators, and communicators (see Cohen 1985), who “make sites and societies accessible and interesting for visitors” (Feldman and Skinner 2018: 6). Many Kraków tour guides realize that the chakra can help to engage tourists personally and emotionally with Wawel. The chakra is potentially attractive for a variety of contemporary visitors; it has a mystical aura and combines romanticizing visions of the “remote past,” orientalism, and concepts of natural healing with a trans-religious understanding of energy. It can be treated seriously but also with sheer curiosity or enjoyment. When skillfully narrated by a tour guide, it provides a feeling of something out of the museum routine as well as something local and authentic, even more so since it is not recognized officially and is described as secretly practiced by locals.

The perception of Wawel as a heritage site by tour guides is much more dynamic than the museum’s official stance that sees it as a rather fossilized entity to be simply preserved. Guides, who interpret the heritage site directly for visitors, are usually eager to accept the chakra practices and stories as a bottom-up domain that co-constitutes contemporary meanings of Wawel, and they are quick to learn how to apply these meanings in their guiding strategies. However, as I will describe in the next section, the tour guides also need to navigate cautiously when dealing with the Catholic clergy and their negative attitude toward the chakra.

### “The Church Will Not Allow . . .”

“Are they not chasing people away today?” asked a middle-aged woman, a note of surprise in her voice, when standing to my right and leaning against the wall in the courtyard at the chakra energy spot. “Pe-re-stroi-ka! Didn’t you hear? Things have changed, they’re gonna open the chakra!” expressively responded the man on my left, with whom just few minutes before I was discussing the new, more tolerant policy toward accessing the chakra spot introduced by the new museum director, who was appointed in January 2020.<sup>12</sup> “Ah, but the church will not allow . . .” doubtfully answered the woman on my right—while still leaning against the wall. She then told me the story about her previous visit to Kraków three years ago. During the drawing of energy at the chakra, she and other people were chased away by a Catholic nun. “She came here and started shouting, ‘Heathens! Pagans! Superstitions!’ Then she exclaimed that our behavior was out of keeping with

‘the solemnity of the place!’ and that we should not do anything ‘like that’ at Wawel.”

This is not the only story about the Catholic religious clergy expressing their hostile attitudes toward the chakra beliefs and practices that we collected during our fieldwork. Probably the most famous is yet another nun, who—as described by people who regularly draw energy at the castle courtyard—used to sprinkle holy water over those gathering at the chakra spot, exorcising them from the “satanic practices.” A valuable insight into the clergy’s attitudes toward the chakra was also revealed during interviews and discussions with the tour guides. A few of them described in detail their collaboration with Polish groups often coming from smaller towns and villages, which are organized by Catholic parishes and led by priests. One person, who has been working as a professional Kraków tour guide for the last thirteen years and often leads tourists to Wawel, stated:

When I have a group like that, it happens that a priest, who organizes the trip, calls me beforehand to discuss details of the visit to the city. And then, often I am asked not to mention any “nonsense, like that about the chakra” because “we arrive in Kraków as pilgrims and practicing Catholics.” (Interview, 6 December 2019)

Another tour guide mentioned that a priest, who brought a group of children from his parish to visit Kraków and Wawel, wanted her to emphasize the story about Saint Stanislaus—a medieval martyr and a bishop of Kraków whose relics are exhibited in the cathedral—and to avoid talking about any “pagan beliefs, like the chakra, so they do not influence children’s brains.”

The contemporary criticism of the chakra by the Catholic clergy follows the pattern revealed in the 2001 announcement. First, the chakra beliefs are labeled as “superstitions,” “nonsense,” or “rubbish.” They are deprived, thereby, of any “religious status,” while the Catholic version of the sacred is presented as the “cultural norm,” “religion,” and a proper element of the grandiose national heritage site. Second, whenever the chakra’s religious dimension is taken more seriously, it happens to be framed as a “foreign spirituality,” described as “occult,” “oriental,” and “pagan.” It is inappropriate and sinful for Catholics, even dangerous and “satanic,” to draw energy and believe in the chakra.

When these hostile attitudes by the Roman Catholic clergy toward the chakra are analyzed, it is important to remember that the trans-religious and transnational spirituality expressed by the “energy grammar” generally poses a challenge to institutionally oriented religions (Fedele 2018: 114). In the Polish context, the development of chakra spirituality can be regarded as part of the challenge posed by various “new religious movements” to the

hegemonic position of the Roman Catholic Church in postcommunist Polish society. Additionally, the chakra's connection with Wawel—as the most important national heritage site—potentially destabilizes the dominant concept of national heritage. The trans-religious and heterogeneous spirituality publicly practiced at the castle courtyard introduces new components to Wawel as a religious heritage complex. These components go beyond the sacralization of the national heritage through Catholic symbols and possibly question the Catholic monopoly in the sacralization of Wawel as a heritage site.

### **(In)Compatible Sacred?**

Contrary to the top-down managerial perspective, most of the chakra energy drawers are convinced that the energy spot is fully compatible with Wawel and fits well into its symbolic dimension as national history and sacralized heritage. The chakra is usually recognized by them as not only an integral part of Wawel but even as its “core,” which has a direct link with the history of the Polish nation and the history of Kraków as the old capital city. “It is because of the chakra that Kraków turned out to be such an important and renowned place,” mentioned one interviewee (interview, 15 September 2018). His statement summarizes approaches and opinions popular among people who visit Wawel to draw energy. For instance, a woman from central Poland whom I once encountered at the chakra spot, after completing her energy drawing session, looked around, visibly admiring the beauty of the Renaissance courtyard, and spontaneously shared her feelings with me: “Look at this big history here! It is possible that it all happened because of the chakra, because of its power!”

Indeed, many people we talked with at the chakra site or during the ethnographic interviews eagerly interpreted various facts from Polish history as referring to the chakra's location at Wawel. In their accounts, the hill's national reputation is not challenged by the presence of the energy spot but is rather confirmed by it. Popular interpretations create links between the hill—seen as a “condensed reservoir of Polish history” (interview, 11 October 2019)—and the chakra. Hence, it is often said that the Wawel chakra enabled the Polish state to emerge and consolidate in its early stages (i.e., between the tenth and thirteenth centuries). Furthermore, Kraków's subsequent development as a royal seat and a capital city (i.e., the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries) is seen as proof that the city and country thrived because of the chakra's energy. Very popular is the belief that due to the chakra's protective powers Kraków was spared from any serious damage



during and after World War II, unlike Warsaw's gruesome fate. Important historic figures connected with Wawel are also frequently mentioned as influenced by the chakra energy. Among them are not only royals who lived at the castle, but also national heroes and leaders who visited the hill or are buried in the cathedral's vaults, such as Marshal Piłsudski, the military commander and head of the Polish state after World War I. Even the late pope John Paul II appears in the chakra stories. Before he became a pope, Karol Wojtyła had lived in Kraków for almost forty years (1938–78) and served as an archbishop at the Wawel Cathedral. As one person asserted, "He must have been aware of this [the chakra] because he lived here, and he knew and often mentioned publicly that Kraków had this special meaning" (informal discussion at the chakra spot, 15 February 2020).<sup>13</sup>

Associating Pope John Paul II—a Catholic saint and a figure who in Polish popular discourses often appears as "a national hero", "the Polish Pope," or "the great Pole" (Niedźwiedź 2017: 84)<sup>14</sup>—with the chakra complements both the national and religious dimensions of Wawel. Although the chakra is opposed by the Roman Catholic Church authorities and its clergy, stories popular among the chakra energy drawers refer to an underlying correlation between the energy spot and a Christian aura emanating from the cathedral. This correlation is grounded in the hill's topography and its alternative interpretation. The courtyard's corner and the wall where people gather to draw energy is located right above the archaeological excavations that in the 1920s revealed the Romanesque church of Saint Gereon.<sup>15</sup> The church is on the exact site where people believe the chakra is located. Popular stories point out that the old Romanesque church was located between the cathedral and the castle and that this was not accidental. It is claimed that the masons constructing the church in the eleventh century knew about the "ley lines" and the "energy spot"; they had access to pre-Christian Slavic beliefs and ancient secrets that, in the Middle Ages, were embraced by Christianity. One of the interviewees, a promoter of the chakra's healing powers and a leader of an informal group, the Supporters of the Wawel Chakra, explained:

There are no accidents here; these things are linked, even though they are impenetrable for us. It was an old place of cult, more than one thousand years ago. And then the church of Saint Gereon appeared—it was here first and functioned as the [original] Wawel Cathedral! Only later did they build the new cathedral and the castle. (Interview, 15 September 2018)

Attitudes toward the Christian aura and Catholic presence at Wawel vary among the chakra followers. Those who are practicing Catholics or feel spiritually connected with the Catholic tradition straightforwardly combine the

Catholic sacred of the cathedral with the powers of the chakra. Some people mention experiencing the chakra's energy when praying in the cathedral's Eucharistic chapel. The chapel is situated on the east edge of the ecclesiastical building, which makes it the closest point to the supposed location of the chakra inside the cathedral. Also other locations inside the building, especially those related to popular Polish saints and their reliquaries and mementos (like Queen Jadwiga and Pope John Paul II), are seen as imbued with a spiritual dimension, energy, or healing powers.

Generally, chakra energy drawers describe the cathedral as a “spiritual place” where the chakra's influence can also be felt by those who are not connected with Catholicism. Many enter the cathedral to meditate or to “sit and feel the energy.” For some, the cathedral is a reminder about links between the chakra energy and historical events. While attitudes toward the cathedral as an edifice filled with “spiritual energy” are mostly accepted, attitudes toward the managers of the cathedral are much more negative. Often, they are considered to be “the enemies of the chakra” who “do not like any competition at Wawel” and are blind to the power of the energy spot. Some energy drawers also detect a secret recognition of the chakra's power by the Catholic priests and an appropriation of energy by the church for its own purposes from the Middle Ages up to the present.<sup>16</sup>

The belief that the chakra should not be seen as related to any exact religious tradition or religious institution prevails among the chakra followers, irrespective of their individual religious and ideological background. In this discourse, the chakra and its powers relate to a primordial and universal “energy” that is open to anybody and can be felt potentially by anyone. Even though “for the managers of Wawel the chakra is at odds with the national and religious order that dominates at this symbolic space” (interview, 18 December 2019)—as one of the tour guides recapitulated—a closer look at discourses about the chakra reveals that they all emphasize the symbolic importance of Wawel. Chakra practices and narratives in fact do not challenge but rather confirm the reputation of Wawel as an important sacred and national heritage site, framing it, however, within more universal, trans-religious, and transnational discourses than those advanced by the official managers. The stories about the chakra also extend the dominant national history that is usually narrated to visitors at Wawel and include the pre-Christian period while adding their own interpretation. Energy drawers emphasize that the chakra had been present before the cathedral and the castle were even constructed and before the Polish state emerged. In that sense, stories about the chakra extend the history about the sacredness of Wawel embracing pre-Christian Slavic beliefs into narratives about the contemporary religious heritage site.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

The chakra drawing practices present at the castle courtyard at least since the early 1980s, and contested by institutional managers of this most important Polish national heritage site, have been influencing perceptions about Wawel for four decades and have added new interpretations and narratives to popular discourses about the hill. Chakra beliefs generate close, often intimate and emotionally loaded physical interactions between visitors and Wawel. This “experiential domain on the ground”—an alternative to officially promoted practices and a dominant heritage regime—responds to various needs overlooked by the site’s institutional managers.

The chakra functions as a rather inclusive and noninstitutional sacred spot that is open to various spiritualities and individuals. At the same time, it is also an attractive and lively new element of Wawel referred to by Kraków tour guides as a “local attraction” or a “legend.” It allows various visitors to add a more personal or even lighter dimension to a grand historic monument. What is also important, the chakra’s popularity grew in the moment when Polish society opened up to outside discourses and transnational contacts after the collapse of the Iron Curtain. On the one hand, the chakra has absorbed various new spiritual currents and introduced them to the national heritage site. On the other hand, the chakra has situated Wawel in a more universal network and multicultural context than national and Catholic-oriented discourses promoted by the official managers.

The chakra site can be interpreted therefore as a place where the bottom-up and informal production and management of meanings are created around the Wawel. Even though not recognized by official managers, the chakra practices and beliefs are already a part of the Wawel heritage dynamics, confirming the fluid nature of heritage, challenging ossified managerial approaches, and adding a trans-religious and transnational layer to the most important heritage site in Poland.

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## NOTES

1. I would like to thank Mariusz Meus for providing the estimates of the plateau's surface.
2. Over one million visitors annually enter the Royal Castle museum (ticketed entry), while it is estimated that around two million people visit the hill. See <https://wawel.krakow.pl/en/the-castle> (accessed 20 February 2020).
3. I use this descriptive term to avoid any connotations with a concept of any organized "group" or "community." While there are some emerging hierarchies and structures among those who draw energy at Wawel (e.g., an informal society named the Supporters of the Wawel Chakra), the term "energy drawers" embraces many independent individuals of varying ideological and religious backgrounds and varying levels of commitment to the chakra. On similar problems with labeling non-homogenous and non-organized individuals connected with spiritual movements, see Weibel (2001: 87).
4. The research was conducted as a part of the HERILIGION: The Heritagization of Religion and Sacralization of Heritage in Contemporary Europe research project, funded by Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) grant # 5087-00505A, by myself and Jacek Skrzypek, who worked as a member of auxiliary staff. My preliminary research started in 2016 with participant observation and informal discussions at the chakra spot and with Kraków inhabitants who do not draw energy but heard about the chakra. More systematic participant observation and informal discussions about the chakra were undertaken between September 2018 and February 2020 (especially in the fall of 2018 and of 2019). Informal discussions involved the chakra energy drawers at the chakra spot, tour guides whom we met at Wawel, and people who sell souvenirs in shops located at the hill. Additionally, ten in-depth interviews with the chakra energy drawers were conducted and four in-depth interviews with tour guides who work as full-time, licensed city guides (interviews with tour guides were conducted by Jacek Skrzypek in October and December 2019). Internet research was also included because some chakra energy drawers are very active online (some of them referred to their websites, YouTube channels, or Facebook groups during the interviews and discussions). In September 2018, Jacek Skrzypek also collected material during the Second Rally of the Supporters of the Wawel Chakra in Stare Olesno (this two-day meeting was organized mostly as a fair dedicated to alternative medicine and healing practices). Ethnographic materials used in this chapter were collected before the Covid pandemic and epidemiological restrictions announced in Poland in March 2020. In this chapter I do not refer to these events.
5. These publications include a popular book on "legends and mysteries of Kraków" prepared by an ethnologist, Anna Szalapak, where she lists the Wawel chakra as one of the "legends" (2005: 158–63), and a brief description of various narratives about the chakra collected by a historian, Andrzej Szoka (2019).
6. Like many of these authors I prefer not to apply the term "New Age" as an analytical concept, debated recently in social sciences and questioned by social actors. See Fedele 2013: 16.
7. There is no space in this chapter to discuss these intimate relations in detail. But it is important to realize that many people we met at the chakra spot develop strong

emotional bonds with Wawel. There are people who experienced healing or found support in difficult moments (for instance, when a closed one was dying, or after the loss of a child). I also met a person for whom the relationship with the chakra became so important that he decided to move to Kraków to be able to draw on the chakra energy every day.

8. Olga Szpunar and Bartosz Mleczo, “Kłopoty z czakramem [Problems with the chakra],” *Gazeta w Krakowie*, 28 May 2001 (accessed 14 February 2020), <https://krakow.wyborcza.pl/krakow/1,44425,291428.html>.
9. Jarosław Knap and Agnieszka Sijka, “Energia negatywna” [Negative energy], *Tygodnik Wprost*, nr 24 (968), 17 June 2001 (accessed 14 February 2020), <https://www.wprost.pl/tygodnik/10305/Energia-negatywna.html>.
10. The change of law was connected with a national deregulation of licenses and freeing occupations connected with tourism. However, the majority of Kraków city guides collaborate with tourist agencies that employ only those guides who completed a course to become a Kraków guide and passed all the exams.
11. Marek Bartosik, “Prof. Ostrowski hrabia z Wawelu [Prof. Ostrowski: the count from Wawel],” *Gazeta Krakowska*, 17 August 2012 (accessed 14 February 2020), <https://gazetakrakowska.pl/prof-ostrowski-hrabia-z-wawelu/ar/638461>.
12. Right after taking up office, the new director did not discuss the chakra issue *per se*; however, he moved the rope and the stands that had been blocking access to the wall (in his view “fighting with myths” makes no sense [personal communication]). About new developments, see endnote 15.
13. This is not an isolated opinion. The 1978 “election of the pope from Kraków” is frequently discussed as “a visible example of how emanations of the chakra influence us.” See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=diSqCypGmqQ> (accessed 14 February 2020).
14. The popular image of John Paul II as a national hero does not limit itself to devout Catholics and relates not only to his religious activities but also to his role in political history (especially in the context of the fall of Communism in east central Europe in 1989–90). However, recently his popular reception in Poland has become more diverse—for instance, due to current debates on the sexual abuse scandals in the church that took place during his pontificate.
15. At the end of July 2020 (when the Covid pandemic restrictions were temporally loosened in Poland), a new tourist route was opened at Wawel. This route includes—among other attractions—a visit to archaeological sites at Saint Gereon church. This new arrangement is described by the chakra energy drawers as “the opening of the chakra,” even though the museum is clear about disallowing drawing energy practices at Saint Gereon church and does not mention the chakra in its promotional materials (Saint Gereon church is described as a representation of the oldest Christian architecture in Polish lands). The castle controls the flow of tourist entering the new route (every day only a limited number of tickets is sold, and each group entering the route is led by a museum guide). This chapter draws on materials collected up to February 2020 and does not discuss this new tourist route, which is the subject of my continued research at Wawel.
16. A similar concept of the appropriation of the sacred by religious institutions is described by anthropologists working on alternative spiritualities and energy pilgrims present in various Christian shrines—for example, at Rocamadour (Weibel 2001),

Catholic shrines dedicated to Mary Magdalene (Fedele 2013), or Chartres Cathedral (Fedele 2018).

17. Many people connected with Paganism and Slavic traditions draw energy at the Wawel chakra. Due to scarcity of space in this chapter, I do not discuss it in detail.

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