

*Book Review: New Studies of Folk Religiosity in Poland*

Stachowiak, Andrzej. 2021. *Miejsca święte na Pomorzu*. Pruszcz Gdański; Słupsk: Wydawnictwo Jasne. 278 pages.

The study of folk religiosity in Poland has a long and rich history. Ethnographers, folklorists, historians, sociologists, cultural anthropologists, and literary critics have turned to this issue. Among the new monographs in this field are *The People's Bible: Interpretation of Biblical Plots in Folk Culture* by Magdalena Zowchak (2000), *The Roads and Places of Folk Religion* by Tomasz Kalniuk (2019), and *Holy Space: About Pilgrim Roads, Pilgrimages, Pilgrims, Places of Pilgrimage And Folk Piety in the Ancient Principality of Pomerania* by Wojciech Łysiak (2010). Well-known anthologies of holy places in Poland include *Holy Places of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth: Lexicon* (Jackowski 1999) and *Lexicon of Saints* (Niewęglowski 1999). Scientific attention has not neglected the Pomeranian region: *Religious Rites of the Pomeranians of the Early Middle Ages: Archaeological Research* (Kajkowski 2019), *A History of the Catholic Church in the Modern Territory of the Archdiocese of Gdansk* (Jażdżewski 2014–2015), *Archaeological Monuments of Pomerania: Pomeranian Voivodeship* (Kalka and Ellwart 2020). This list can be easily extended.

The attention given to folk religiosity is not decreasing. In 2021, Poland published at least two books of interest to ethnographers and folklorists about Polish saints in folk culture (Gocół and Szadura 2021) and about the holy places of Polish Pomerania, specifically Christian and pre-Christian sacred loci and objects in the West Pomeranian and Pomeranian administrative divisions (Stachowiak 2021).<sup>1</sup> The author of the latter, Andrzej Stachowiak, is a Polish ethnographer and researcher at the Museum of Pomeranian Folk Culture in Swolowo

who previously researched stone crosses in Lemko (Stachowiak 2009) and religious conflict in Lemko after 1947 (Stachowiak 2017). The value of this publication is that the source material for the book was collected in a short time, and therefore the book primarily shows the synchronous state of sacred places in one region. In addition, the publication allows the non-Polish reader to draw some conclusions about the peculiarities of Polish religiosity that Poles themselves may not notice. I will present here my thoughts on the book and on folk religiosity as a researcher of folk culture.

The author identified Holy Places of Pomerania as a popular-science publication. Popularity lies in the way the material is presented, i.e. without reference to scientific literature, which would complicate the reader's perception. At the same time, the significance of popular literature is important for scientific discourse. Both folklorists and ethnographers are constantly turning to the publications of the 19th century, which by today's standards might be called popular. Such publications became the basis for contemporary ethnographic study.

The short word "From the author" modestly defines the main purpose of the publication as being a guide to the holy places of Pomerania, which will be useful for tourists and pilgrims (p. 9). At the same time, a considerable amount of carefully collected and processed material will not only help interested travellers and pious people navigate in Pomerania, but also gives grounds to draw scientific conclusions about the patterns of formation and function of the holy place as a sociological-cultural phenomenon.

The book has two main parts: "Holy Places: Introduction" and "Lexicon of Holy

Places in Pomerania". In the first, theoretical, part, the author reflects on what a sacred place (*locum sacrum*) is for the researcher and for the believer, the different types of sanctuary, and the historical events that influenced the formation of such loci. Space is an important value that people have long been trying to master, that is to share, name, evaluate it. Humanised territory commonly contains its own world with a sacred centre and other world. The sacred centre is marked with a cross, a chapel, a temple. The other world is dangerous – it is located in cemeteries, on borders, far from human space. This space also has its sacred centre (*axis mundi*), which can be unusual rocks, boulders, stone complexes, springs, trees, islands, etc. (p. 11). These loci are attributed special value because they facilitate communication between these two worlds. Unusual springs, stones, and large trees activate the human imagination with their ability to clean, their monumentality, endurance, size. Folk legends and beliefs arise around these spatial objects. In folklore, especially in fairy tales, the conversations of devils or witches can be heard, and through such places and objects the hero falls into the afterlife space.

Through large amounts of research material and the method of mapping, Stachowiak traced an important trend in the formation of the sanctuary: they often occur in places where pre-Christian shrines were located. The maps on which the holy places are marked (pp. 42–43) clearly prove this. Thus, archaeological data show that the most important peaks for the Pomeranian Slavs were the mountains Chelm, Polyanov and Rovokol. They became sanctuaries for the three Pomeranian Madonnas and important places of pilgrimage called Koszalin, Polyanow and Smoldzino (p. 22), something that was manifest in the cult of St Wojciech. According to a legend, this bishop preached on a rock near the settlement of Leosia, which is now known by two names, the Devil's Stone and the Stone of St Wojciech

(p. 27). After the saint's death, his remains were buried on a hill under an oak tree, on the ancient site of a pre-Christian cult, now called the Hill of St Wojciech (pp. 195–197). His remains then went on to be interred in Gniezno Cathedral.

Of the 72 places described in the publication, 28 are pre-Christian holy place: "In about half of the places of ancient cults, their sacred function was continued (of course, in a modified form) after the adoption of Christianity by the Pomeranians" (p. 27). This shows the special importance of these places for local residents.

Some scholars of folk culture have not given up on the romantic desire of 19th-century scholars to find a Slavic pre-Christian pantheon of gods. The author's opinion on the existence of "Slavic gods: Triglav, Chornobog or Belbuk (White God)", and pre-Christian pilgrimages to them (p. 13) as if there were Svyatovid or Svarozhyts (p. 25) is surprising. I agree with the position that the set of pre-Christian deities was as recorded by folklorists and ethnographers in the 19th and 20th centuries: the list of deities was local and people knew how to treat these creatures, who were friendly or hostile depending on people's behaviour. In addition, the cult of the dead was and still is important. After all, pre-Christian and Christian beliefs to this day create a kind of symbiosis in the Polish folk picture of the world.

The most valuable element of the first part of the book is the analysis of the modern life of Christian holy places, with Stachowiak's reflections on pilgrimages to holy places. He proposes the term pilgrimage ritual and distinguishes three phases: involvement (in the travelling community), coming (to the holy place) and withdrawal (return to everyday life) (p. 14). This is an individual rite of passage for each pilgrim, important for his or her spiritual development. The author is correct about the exceptional "cultural and integrative function of

holy places, which for centuries have been an arena for the exchange of cultural values, as well as a center for cementing public relations at the local, regional and even national level" (p. 14).

Stachowiak also observes the psychological and social aspects of pilgrimage, asking for example why people decide to go to a holy place, and what their behaviour should be in order to consider a pilgrimage successful. Stachowiak comes to the conclusion that people are guided by a strong belief in the personal intercession of God near miraculous icons and sculptures:

Believers are convinced that through physical contact with icons and sculptures (touching, rubbing, kissing), contemplating a deep look at their image in an act of simple prayer, a request through an appeal written on a piece of paper, and through donation to a treasury with the inscription, for example, "Bread St Anthony", their problems will appear before God and will be solved (p. 39).

The second part of the book, "Lexicon of Holy Places in Pomerania", is a geographical dictionary of places that have special religious significance. Every dictionary article contains the official name of the place or shrine, its address or geographical indication (this applies to non-Christian shrines), and information on the origin and history of the place, often accompanied by a photo.

Among the modern canonical sanctuaries in Pomerania, almost half are dedicated to the Mother of God (p. 29). In general, the cult of the Mother of Jesus is very strong throughout Poland. According to folk legends, the Mother of God herself chooses the places where she wants to be honoured. She reveals herself to poor artisans and communicates her will, with her sculpture returning three times to an honoured place. It is a pity that the author does not say how he knows about these folklore texts, because for

researchers it is very important to know the characteristics of legends and to determine the origins of such texts (for example, oral or church literature). Researchers are also interested in how widespread such texts are (i.e. whether they are known only to church people or among the general public).

A national feature of the folk piety of Poles is the variety of names for the Mother of God in religious culture, a diversity that strikes the researcher of another nationality. There are four main types of nomination for temples, icons and sculptures of the Mother of God: personal qualities and functions, the location of the shrine, copies of world-famous icons and sculptures, and combined nominations. The most numerous is the first group: Sorrowful Mother of God, Consoling, Affectionate, Motherly, Beautiful, Pregnant, Immaculate, Perpetually Helpful, Help the Faithful, Blessed Sacrament Queen of the World, Queen of Poland, Queen of Pomerania and Mother of Unity, Queen of Kashubians, Queen of the Polish Sea, Queen of Families, Queen of Peace, Queen of Hope, Guardian of Sailors and Fishermen, Star of the Sea, Mother of Unity and others. There is also quite a large group of names based on location: Trombkowska Mother of God (in Trąbki Wielkie), Wejherowska (in Wejherowo), Brzeska (in Brzesk), Reska (in Resko), Olivska (in Gdańsk-Oliwa), Garchynska (in Garczyn), Łęgowska (in Łęgowo). The third type is the names of famous miraculous icons of God and sculpture copies: Fatima (in Gdansk, Szczecin, Darlow), Czestochowa (in Krensko, Krępsko) (pp. 36–37). Combined multi-word nominations include Mother of God of Lechen Suffering Queen of Poland (p. 190). According to the number of mentions given in the "Index of Saints and Blessed, as well as supernatural beings" (pp. 275–278), Mother of God is twice more respected than Jesus Christ; and the honouring of Jesus Christ can be compared with the honouring of Pope John Paul II (p. 276), whose veneration has increased steadily in Poland.

Among the saints in Pomerania, the following saints are especially revered: St. Otto, Wojciech, Faustina Kowalska, Dorota of Mantua, Apostle Peter, Apostle Paul, John the Baptist, Anthony of Padeva, Apostle Andrew, Joseph the Betrothed, Rosalia of Palermo. The list is based on the number of mentions, so we are convinced that the most revered are those saints whose lives and missionary work was connected with Pomerania.

In addition to icons and sculptures, Pomerania also honoured numerous, constantly changing, relics. Thus, among the relics were once fragments of the Saviour's cross, the head of St Barbara, the head of St Valentine, the key of St Hubert, as well as diapers, hair and blood of Jesus Christ (until the 19th century). Today, items that once belonged to Pope John Paul II have become important relics. The intensification of the cult of relics is connected with the development of the pilgrimage movement in Pomerania, which dates back to the 12th century (p. 31). In western Pomerania, where the Reformation (Protestantism) was introduced in 1534, many holy sites ceased to exist, while in Gdansk (eastern) Pomerania Catholicism remained, and therefore so too did cults. Subsequently, the development of science and positivist knowledge led to secularisation and the gradual decline of the cult of relics, some of which either disappeared or were gradually forgotten. At the same time, the desire of a person to appropriate a share of holiness, to keep it in his or her home in order to turn to it if necessary, remains unchanged. Hence the consecrated icons, figures of saints, are interpreted as substitutes for the saint and are brought home from pilgrimages. For some, these items become the centre of that saint's domestic cult (see Wróblebska 2021). This is how personal sacred space in each house arises. After all, today's fridge magnets are also relics of this appropriation of holiness.

Stachowiak's conclusions on church regulation of the number of sanctuaries are also of interest. It was unexpected for me to learn that these matters are completely regulated by the church, which decides where to announce a new holy place, and which icon can no longer be prayed to with special enthusiasm. A special religious ceremony is held to establish a holy place, giving it the status of sanctuary. Thus, in our time "it is planned to establish two more shrines dedicated to the patrons of the [Koszalin-Kolobzhe] diocese: St. Wojciech (Koszalin) and St. Maximilian Kolbe (Slupsk)". Such plans of ecclesiastical authority are mentioned many times in the book (pp. 70, 129).

It will be interesting for Ukrainian readers to learn that in Pomerania, where there are 30 Ukrainian churches, the Greek Catholic Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Bialy Bor) was given the high status of St Mary's sanctuary in 2007 (p. 115). The church was built between 1993 and 1997, and in 2019 was included in the register of cultural monuments. Another Ukrainian church is the Greek Catholic Church of the Nativity of John the Baptist in Chluchow (built between 1994 and 1996). The church holds relics of St Josaphat Kuntsevich (1580–1623), Archbishop of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, founder of the Basilian Order and canonised in 1867 as a martyr. For his missionary activity, Pope John Paul II called him "the apostle of unity" (p. 158). St Josaphat Kuntsevich is honoured on November 12.

The book *Holy Places in Pomerania* contains a lot of information about folk religiosity and about the peculiarities of people's understanding of holiness and the path to God. It is especially interesting to learn about penitential crosses (pp. 75, 89), which mark the place of sin, but symbolise the sinner's desire to repent. Thus, the penitential cross in Stargard is "a sign of repentance to the murderer and one of the forms of his penance" (p. 75).

The material of the book gives grounds for two important conclusions about popular religiosity, both Christian and pre-Christian. Firstly, folk religiosity has a local character. Christian places of worship often arose where pre-Christian holy places used to be. Saints associated with the region are more popular in each area than well-known saints such as the apostles. Within every Christian tradition, local cults emerge, especially revered and loved by the people, such as the dance of the icon (pp. 40–41). Secondly, the cult of holy places is in constant dynamics: some holy places lose popularity while others appear, and pilgrimage changes, enriched with new elements and meaning.

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