

THE SZELIGA DEVICE IN THE *LIBRO DEL CONOSCIMIENTO*

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On folio 4v of the Castilian *Libro del conocimiento de todos los rregnos*,¹ dated to the second half of the XIVth century, the description of the Polish lands is accompanied by two illustrations. According to the text, these represent the flag of «the King of Poland» and the flag of «the King of Lvov».² The first illustration (fig. 1) is of a shield argent (in fact white) on a flag or (in fact yellow). The shield is charged with a cross fitchy rising from a crescent, both gules. The flag of «the King of Lvov» is almost identical, except that the flag is not or (yellow), but gules (fig. 2).

It is generally accepted that since 1295 (the coronation of Przemysl II) a White Eagle on a red shield has been the emblem of the Polish Kingdom.³ The symbol presented is not an eagle. Neither does it resemble the coat of arms of the city of Cracow (a city wall with three towers and an open gate), the coat

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¹ According to MS. Z (*Libro del conocimiento de todos los rregnos et tierras et señoríos que son por el mundo, et de las señales et armas que han*, facsimile edition, with study and transcription by M. J. Lacarra, M. C. Lacarra y A. Montaner, Zaragoza Institution «Fernando el Catolico», 1999).

² «Et el rrey desta Palonja ha por senalles vn pendon bianco con vna cruz vermeja atal: [...] Et el rrey deste Leon ha por señales estas que se siguen» = 'The king of this Polonia has as his device a white flag with a red cross, like this. [...] And the king of Leon has as his device the following one' (*Libro del conocimiento*, MS. Z, f. 4vj. MS. S reads as follows: «Et el rrey desta Polonia a por señales un pendon verde con esta senal vermeja atal. [...] Et el rrey desta Leon a por señales un pendon verde con esta cruz bermeja, segund que aquí se sigue» = 'The king of this Polonia has as his insignia a green flag with this vermilion emblem, like this. [...] And the king of Leon has as his insignia a green flag with a vermilion cross, as is seen here' (*El libro del conocimiento de todos los reinos* (*The Book of Knowledge of All Kingdoms*), ed., trans, and study by N. F. Marino, Tempe, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999, pp. 14-15).

³ A. Znamierowski, «Elementy herbu polskiego 1295-1995», w *Orzeł Biały. Herb Paristwa Polskiego*, Warszawa, 1996, p. 61

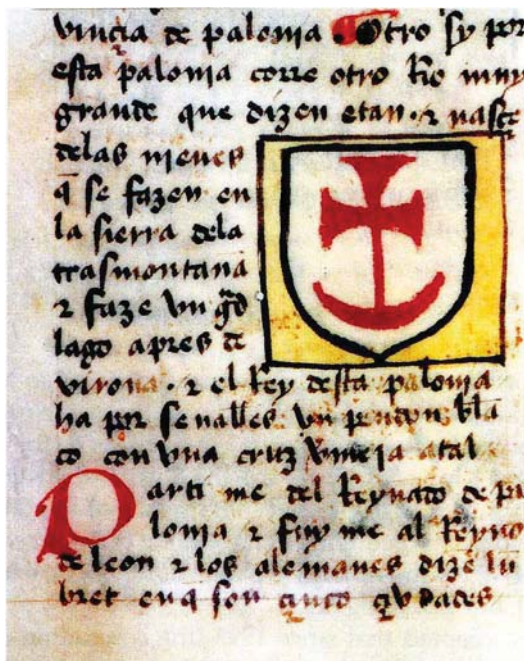


Figura 1. The heraldic device of the King of Palonia (Poland) in MS. Z of Libro del conocimiento (Munich, Bayerische Saatsbibliothek, Cod. hisp. 150, f. 4v).



Figura 2. The heraldic device of the King of Leon (Lvov) in MS. Z of Libro del conocimiento (Munich, Bayerische Saatsbibliothek, Cod. hisp. 150, f. 4v).

of arms of Lvov (city wall with a lion rampant on the gate), the Cracow lands (a crowned eagle) nor the Lvov lands (a lion rampant on a rock).⁴ Additionally, in relation to the second half of the XIVth century, one cannot speak of kings of Cracow or Lvov. Cracow had been for centuries the capital city of the Polish Kingdom, and Lvov one of the most important cities of the then existing Polish state, incorporated into Poland by Kazimierz the Great after the conquest of Red Russia in 1340.⁵

It is generally known that the circulation of information in the Middle Ages was in many ways limited, due to the necessity of travelling quite long distances using relatively slow means of transport (horse, carriage), on roads that were endangered by robbery, without precise maps and often with no knowledge of destination. Preparation of a chronicle describing the Europe of that time and using information acquired personally by the author would have seemed almost impossible. For that reason the chroniclers of that time (that is, monks) often used the works of other authors —chronicles, oral reports, the so-called coast maps. Thanks to such endeavours the chronicler could concentrate on the (anyway time-consuming) manual writing, and —without travelling to dangerous or distant regions— he had a greater chance of finishing the work. Therefore chronicles often contained unverified and falsified data, combining news from the nearest neighbourhood with information about the outskirts from dozens of years before.

Using the methods of a medieval monk, we searched for accessible sources from that period. We found a charge identical with the one we were looking for among medieval maps of the coasts of Europe. The oldest one, included in the so-called Catalan Atlas (attributed to Cresques Abraham and Jafudà Cresques) is dated to *circa* 1375. There are two city centres on the map, described as «Cracouja» (=Cracow) and «Ciutat de Leo» (=Lvov), symbolised by a drawing of city walls. Over the walls there are flags with the sign we were searching for.

The historical period (second half of the XIVth century) and the territorial connection of the sign with Cracow and Lvov allow us to suggest two hypotheses. They are as follows.

FIRST HYPOTHESIS

We are dealing here with a medieval Polish knightly coat of arms called *Szeliga*. It represents a cross fitchy on a crescent.⁶ The *Szeliga* coat of arms is

⁴ K. Sochaniewicz, *Herb miasta Lwowa*, Lwów, 1933.

⁵ J. Wyrozumski, *Kazimierz Wielki*, Ossolineum, 1986, p. 78-80.

⁶ J. Szymariski, *Herbarz średniowiecznego rycerstwa polskiego*, Warszawa, 1993, p. 268.



Figura 3. The flags of Cracow and Lvov in the Atlas attributed to Cresques Abraham and Jafudà Cresques (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS. Esp. 30).

connected with Cracow through the person of Bodzanta (ca. 1320-1386), Cracow's governor, later the parish-priest of the St Florian parish in Cracow, and finally Archbishop of Gniezno. Three seals of Bodzanta represent the very same coat of arms: from 1366 (as Cracow's governor in the time of the last king of the Piast dynasty, Kazimierz the Great),⁷ from 1375 (as *preposit* or

⁷ A. Małecki, *Studia heraldyczne*, Lwów, 1890, vol. II, p. 136.

provost in St. Florian church in Cracow),⁸ and from 1385 and 1388 (as Archbishop of Gniezno).⁹

Bodzanta was a very influential person in the Poland of that time.¹⁰ He was a member of the royal Council already in the time of Kazimierz the Great.¹¹ He was at that time the *starost* (i. e. *capitaneus cum iurisdictione*) of Cracow.¹² As Archbishop of Gniezno, he baptised the Great Prince of Lithuania Jogailo (Jagiello), the future king of Poland and founder of the Jagellan dynasty, who then received the name Vladislav.¹³

We can only speculate on how Bodzanta's coat of arms became, in the sources of the Libro del conocimiento, the coat of arms of the kings of Poland. Maybe during the king's absence from the Cracow castle, Bodzanta, as the governor, hung on the walls of the building a flag with his own coat of arms, which could easily mislead a foreigner. Maybe the information was spread by a foreign monk who, seeing a very rich cortege of Archbishop Bodzanta coming to the Cracow castle, mistook Bodzanta's personal symbols for the royal coat of arms. Moreover, for a clergyman, an archbishop could personify the true authority, religious as well as secular. It is also possible that among the flags accompanying the royal cortege, going for example to the morning mass, was also the coat of arms of Bodzanta, the governor of the court of the royal couple. This coat of arms was a lot easier to copy and remember than a crowned eagle. And since it was in the royal cortege, for a foreigner it would have been as much a royal symbol as all the others.

Apart from Bodzanta's (Bodzęta's) seals, medieval monuments containing this coat of arms are also preserved. On the keystone of the Gniezno cathedral,¹⁴ the *Szeliga* coat of arms (undoubtedly belonging to this Bodzanta) appears, because he was the Archbishop of Gniezno during the construction of the cathedral, and the supervision of the last stage of the building's construction —its roofing— is attributed to him. The *Szeliga* device also appears on keystones of collegiate churches in Wiślica and Stopnica,¹⁵ founded by Kazimierz the Great. Apart from the coats of arms of the Kingdom and its lands, the keystones in Wiślica present two knights' coats of arms. Historians

⁸ F. Piekosiński, *Pieczęcie polskie wieków średnich*, Kraków, 1899, p. 268, fig. 326.

⁹ See respectively M. Gumowski, *Handbuch der polnischen Siegelkunde*, Graz, 1966, No. 343, and Biblioteka Książąt Czartoryskich in Cracow, sign. 207.

¹⁰ The same name Bodzęta / Bodzanta belonged to another magnate who lived in about 1290-1366, bishop of Cracow (Krakow).

¹¹ Wyrozumski, op. cit. in n. 5, p. 176

¹² The *starosta* was a kind of governor representing the king in a particular land or county. He was also a local judge.

¹³ 4 March 1386 (J. Krzyżaniakowa & J. Ochmański, *Władysław II Jagiełło*, Ossolineum, p. 153)

¹⁴ J. Łojko, *Średniowieczne herby polskie*, Poznań 1985, p. 50

¹⁵ F. Piekosiński, *Heraldyka polska wieków średnich*, Krakow 1899, p. 158

agree that these are coats of arms of persons closely connected to the king, his associates and allies. Among them, naturally, is Bodzanta's *Szeliga*.



Figura 4. *Szeliga* coat of arms.



Figura 5. *Szeliga* coat of arms on the keystone of the Collegiate church in Wislica (third quarter of the XIVth century).

SECOND HYPOTHESIS

King Kazimierz the Great (1310-1370, ruled from 1333) was the last representative of the Piast dynasty on the Polish throne. The last lines of the family died out in the XVIIth century in Silesia, but after Kazimierz the Great no other Piast ever sat on the Polish throne. Before the White Eagle became the official symbol of the Polish Kingdom (from 1295), sovereigns (kings and princes) from the Piast dynasty used different coats of arms. These were personal coats of arms, used by individual members of the family. We know them from surviving seals and coins. Among those that survived until our time are some symbols deceptively similar to the coat of arms we are searching for. A cross fitchy on a crescent (or semicircle, half-ring) was used as personal charge by Boleslav III the Twisted-mouthed (1102-1138), ruling prince of Poland, and his eldest son, Vladislav the Exile (1138-1146), prince of Silesia.¹⁶ Boleslav on his deathbed divided the country among his sons, trying to prevent in this way wars of succession. His idea did not have the outcome intended. The provinces assigned to individual sons were later divided many times among their descendants, which led to a division of the state that lasted for almost 200 years. It should be added that Cracow was the capital of both sovereigns (Boleslav III and Vladislav II).

This symbol was used by two other princes: Boleslav I the Tall, who ruled in Silesia, son of Vladislav the Exile, and Henry the Bearded (1231-1238),¹⁷

¹⁶ P. Dudziński, *Alfabet heraldyczny*, Warszawa, 1997, p. 214.

¹⁷ Dudziński, op. cit. in n. 15, p. 214.

Vladislav's grandson, who managed to control for a short time the former capital of the kingdom, Cracow, and who made an attempt to unite the country, bringing the Silesian and Cracow lands under his rule.

Thus, we have another attractive hypothesis. The symbol used by the Piasts is deceptively similar to that in the Castilian work. Furthermore, the princes who used it had links with Cracow, as its sovereigns. The title «King of Cracow» makes sense in this context, as designating, during the period of disunity (1138-1320), whoever from among the many Piast princes happened for the time to be ruling in Cracow (only some of them, of different lines and generations, ruled there).

As we have seen, the links between the symbol of a cross fitchy on a crescent and Cracow were already in existence in the twelfth century. There are no similar links with Lvov. The possibility that the cortege of a prince or governor of Cracow, visiting Lvov, was noticed by a foreign observer should be rejected as involving too much coincidence. Also, the title «King of Lvov» does not help here. Until 1340 Lvov did not belong to Poland. It had been founded about 1250 by a Russian prince, Lev (after whom the city was named). But this sovereign, who could indeed be called «King of Lvov», used quite different symbols on his seals¹⁸. From 1340, Lvov was part of the kingdom of Poland, but even then there is no evidence of the cross fitchy for Lvov.

Clearly, in the *Libro del conocimiento* the coats of arms of Palonia (or Cracow) and Lvov are the same except for the colour of the flag. Most probably the author of the designs (draughtsman?, monk?, sailor?) used the rules of Spanish heraldry. With their help he *invented* a coat of arms for Lvov as a variation on that of Cracow, the latter being considered at the same time the arms of the Polish monarch. In other words, he had reliable information about the symbols used by the Piast princes (or by Bodzanta, as governor of Cracow) and from this he constructed the Lvov coat of arms.

The explanation of the meaning and origins of the mysterious symbol assigned to the kings of Palonia and Lvov undoubtedly calls for extensive research by Spanish and Polish historians. The present sketch is no more than an attempt to outline the basic possibilities and though in the writer's view well-founded is not intended as definitive. The writer hopes that the problem will finally be solved as a result of close study of archival sources.

¹⁸ Sochaniewicz, op. cit. in n. 4, pp. 15-18.