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A Hebrew Inscription on the Polish Coronation Sword

The present article deals with the problem of the presumably Hebrew inscription on the coronation sword of Polish kings, known as the "Szczerbiec". Our objective is not to recall or reconstruct the complexity of its history. It is rather to expose some elements of the sword's bizarre haps and mishaps, as far as they may cast some light on the emergence of the inscription and its meaning. The main purpose of our attempt is to present one possible consistent reading of the inscription, taking into account some historical and linguistic data. Our proposal draws from some previous reconstructions, both past and current. Finally, however, we hope to offer an original interpretation of the inscription.

Traditionally it is argued that the sword, the very same one that is displayed in the Wawel Museum, was used in the Middle Ages as a ceremonial sword. Its history is exceptionally complex, and scholars differ considerably, and some extremely in their opinions about it. Different aspects of the history of sword are vague, to say the least. Although many tales and historical sources link the sword with Bolesław Chrobry, a king of Poland, it seems certain that the item stored in the Wawel is not that of Bolesław.

The changes seem to be so deep that we may even venture the question whether the sword in its present form is the same item related by historical sources or not. In other words, we may ask if we are dealing with the *insigne* used during the coronation ceremonies of Polish kings. According to some mediaeval Polish sources – *Kronika Wielkopolska* from the 13th or 14th c. and *Poczet królów Polski* of the 15th c. – the sword was a gift from heaven endowed with a magical power. Consequently, it symbolized the acquisition of power over Kiev by Bolesław Chrobry (according to *Latopis* of Nestor and the chronicles of Wincenty Kadłubek and Gall), and later the transfer of power to him by Emperor Otto III (*Historia polska* by Jan Długosz) (Rokosz 1988: 9–10). From then on the sword was strictly connected with the person of Bolesław Chrobry, to such an extent that in the royal inventories it appears under the name of "Bolesław's sword alias Szczerbiec" (Gumowski 1959: 9).

However, it seems that the events related in the abovementioned sources are mostly legendary, as the sword could have not existed in those times. At least it is not listed among the items of the cathedral treasury from 1110. According to the common opinion of scholars, the sword was made in the 13th c., but the whereabouts and the exact date of its appearance are uncertain. Some scholars argue that the sword is of German-Teutonic origin (Sadowski 1892: 94–95, 100). Others tend to ascribe its production to the armourers from Płock (Gumowski 1959: 14): it was presumed to have been ordered by Jews as a thanksgiving for bestowing on them the Statute of Kalisz in 1264 (Ka-

zimierski 2008: 17). It seems that dating the sword after 1295, the date of the coronation of Przemysł II, should be taken into account (Rokosz 1988: 14). The original coronation insignia were then taken abroad. Therefore, the date of 1320 seems quite probable, as according to some sources the sword known as Szczerbiec appeared during the coronation ceremony of Władysław Łokietek as a ceremonial weapon.

It is certain that Szczerbiec was never used as a cutting side-arms weapon, but only as a ceremonial *insigne*, as a symbol of a count or royal power (which appears during almost all ceremonies of Polish kings with the exceptions of Stanisław Leszczyński and August III) and, as a sword of justice (*gladius justiciae*), as a symbol of judiciary power. Besides, all those functions of the sword are to some extent corroborated by the inscriptions and the fact that the sword is relatively small.

The theories concerning the etymology of the name vary. The oldest explanation, which appears in the *Kronika Wielkopolska*, links the name "Sczirbecz" with "notch", according to the meaning of the root word "szczerba". This etymology would, however, be strange, as no "notch" is testified or present on the blade. The only thing resembling the "notch" is a central ridge, testified on the blade (as was observed by Tadeusz Czacki in 1792). The ridge has a regular shape, therefore it could hardly be called a "notch". Moreover, a legendary report as to the notch's origin is that the sword was supposedly hit against the gate of Kiev. One could, therefore, expect the notch or notches on the edge of the blade, and not just on the flat surface of the blade. Another etymology traces the name "Szczerbiec" back to the effects of its hitting other objects.

What is nowadays displayed in the Wawel Museum and called "Szczerbiec" is a relatively small sword (98.5 cm long) with an ornamented hilt made of gilded silver. The ornaments and inscriptions were engraved using the so-called nillo technique. On the pommel one major and three minor crosses are placed. Additionally, two Greek letters are engraved side by side: A and Ω. On the periphery of the pommel, in two verses runs a Latin inscription in late-Roman majuscules (capital letters): REC FIGVRA TALET AD AMOREM REGVM ET PRINCIPVM IRAS IVDICUM. Some emendations were proposed by scholars, especially REC=HEC and TALET=VALET (Semkowicz 1951: 502). Regarding those suggestions, the translation of the text would be: "This figure incites the kings and counts to love [and] the anger [severity] of the judges." There is no inscribed text on the other side of the pommel, only a floral ornament instead. The symbolic representations of the Evangelists are placed on both sides of the grip. These are sided by the strips with their names. Symbolic representations of Sts. John and Matthews are engraved on one side. Saint John is represented as an eagle, and Saint Matthew as a human being. Additionally, there is a figure of the Lamb of the Lord engraved close to the cross guard of the sword. On the other side of the grip appears the representation of Saint Marcus – a winged lion, and an ox symbolizing Saint Luke. At the same time, on the other side of the grip, the representation of the Lamb of the Lord is here depicted, but in this case without a cross. The names inscribed on the strips are not exclusively majuscules. Two names – those of Saint John and Saint Matthew – are spelled with a minuscule *h*: IhOANNES and MMThCVS. This is regarded as a typical feature of some medieval inscriptions (Semkowicz). In the former case, however, it seems a kind of alliterative mistake – IhOANNES=IOhANNES. Moreover, the name "Matthew" is engraved with a double M and C instead of E, which is again regarded as a typical scribal mistake (Semkowicz, *ibid*.).


SALOMON
SED AL AL ABRAHEL

Apart from the inscriptions on the pommel there are inscriptions on both sides of the cross guard. On one side is written: QVICVMQVE HEC NOMIA DEII SECVM TV LERI NVLLVM PERIC VLVM EI OMNINO NOCBIT CN. With some emendations: NOMIA=NOMINA, TV LERI=TOLERIT (?), NOCBIT=NOCEBIT, PERIC VLVM =PERICVLVM, SECVUM=SE CVM (Cf. Semkowicz 1951: 503) the following translation is proposed by scholars: "Whoever carries with himself these names of God, no danger will ever do him any harm." The last two letters are – for the time being – left unexplained. On the other side of the crossing guard we read: CON CITOMON EEVE SEDALAI EBREhEL. It is suggested that this inscription is in Hebrew. Some roots may indicate or support that opinion, especially *el* and some verbs providing homophonic associations with Hebrew words, like *sedalai ~ el shadday*, *ebre ~eber* or even possibly *eeve ~Yahve*.

In fact, before Muchowski (2007), no scholar had seriously undertaken to attempt to provide a reliable interpretation of this supposedly Hebrew inscription. Almost all texts dealing with the coronation sword recall the interpretation of J.N Sadowski (1892: 106). He reads the words as follows: "Żarliwą wiarę wzbudzają [imiona Boga] Sedalai [i] Ebrehel" [Fervent faith is prompted by these names [of God] Sedalai [and] Ebrehel]. Additionally, the author interprets the word *eeve* as an acronym-name that may hark back to Exodus 3: 13. In the original transcription of Sadowski (*ibid.*) it runs as follows: *Eje aszer Eje … wa Eje* (i.e. *eye asher eye … va eye*). Moreover, Sadowski analyses the word *ebrehel* as follows: *av+reb+el* (i.e. "father" + "great" or "lord" + "god") while *sedalai* – "sadai eloi" (i.e. *saday eloy*) which means, according to the author, "Omnipotent God", i.e. *el shadday* in Biblical Hebrew. The author suggests that these are the "kabalistic" names of God. He concludes, surprisingly enough, "it is better to leave the dark side of the inscription in that uncertainty" (Sadowski 1892: 108).

We do not intend to discuss Sadowski's proposition in detail. His concept has some disadvantages and it will suffice to point out only some of them. If one should undertake to argue that the inscription has a "kabalistic" character, one should provide some parallel "names" originating from this mystical tradition. One should also try to find some parallels in Jewish magical texts, as those of amulets or *segulot*. What we aim to say is that, to prove the "kabalistic" hypothesis, the field of research or investigation should be extended to the Jewish magical traditions. We are also facing here a serious mythological problem: to what extent may we grant space to the presumed "mistakes" in the inscription? As has been pointed out by Semkowicz, we could expect some standard misreading and scribal (or armourers') mistakes in Latin inscriptions. But how far might some transitional processes have "deformed" the original – presumably Hebrew – formulation? The second word of the "Hebrew" inscription – *cit* or *tsit* (in the transcription adopted in the present text) – is interpreted by Sadowski as "to incite". Grammatically, we have four possibilities here: *hitsit* – "he incited"; *matsit* – "he incites"; *yatsit* – "he incites/he will incite"; or *hatset* – "incite!" If the (potential) speaker tried to express the plural form of the verb, i.e. if the "names" were the subject of the clause/inscription, he would use the forms *hitsitu*, *matsitim*, *yatsitu* or *hatsitu* respectively. In many dialects of Hebrew the initial *h* is elided, but usually a "trace" of it is left, i.e. the vowel of the previous C[onsonant]V[owel] syllable. We could therefore expect forms like **itsitu* or **atsitu*. Even if we assume that in the form *yatsitu* the initial *y* and final *u* are dropped, the

resulting form would be *atsit*. We cannot totally exclude a possible misinterpretation/ or mishearing *hitsitu ~ tsit* or *yatsitu ~ tsit* (*cit*), but this does not sound very probable. This consideration illustrates only some difficulties involved in Sadowski's interpretation (also adopted by some other authors).

The text itself, consisting of 28 letters written in the script "still Roman in character", is usually read as follows: CON CITOMON EEVE SEDALAI EBREhEL. Some problems connected with the reading of the text are posed by epigraphic ambiguities. The text's frequent confusion of C with E led some authors to different readings of the inscription (Semkowicz 1951: 502), i.e. CEVE instead of EEVE (Gloger). The division into words is another problem. Gloger reads CIT OMON instead CITOMON. Therefore, Semkowicz proposes "Con. Cit. omon. Eeve. Sadalai. Ebrehel" (*ibid.*: 503).

Semkowicz's proposal takes into account little dots present in the inscription on the cross-guard. It is conspicuous that the inscription is ruled by a kind of symmetry, and those dots serve to keep and even expose this symmetry. For example, there are two dots exactly in the middle of the text, i.e. after 14 letters, separating them from the following 14 ones (regardless of the division into words). As a result, fourteen letters are placed on the left side of the cross-guard vis à vis fourteen on the right part. Some abbreviated forms of words in the Latin text might be determined by this rule. The graphic elements on the hilt are also influenced by this idea: two apostles vis à vis another two ones, and two representations of the Lamb of God.

Trying to decipher the inscription, we should take into account some historical linguistic data. Any attempt to reconstruct the possible sounding of those presumably Hebrew words has to start with the determination of the location and time. The location seems to be certain – Poland or Great Poland. As has already been mentioned, the possible date of the sword's appearance should be put forward to the 14th c., contrary to some legendary accounts (see above). Now, it is necessary to provide some data as to the Hebrew language in Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages. Certainly, the phenomenon called Ashkenazi Hebrew had already emerged. As testified by the texts of vocalized material from some *makhzorim* (prayer books) of the 12th and 13th c. from the Franco-German world (i.e. the Rhine Valley), the common pronunciation was that which followed the Palestinian tradition. This phenomenon is called pre-Ashkenazi Hebrew (see Eldar 1974). However, some symptoms of what is strictly called Ashkenazi pronunciation had already appeared, like *h* realized as [x] (further *kh*) (*ibid.*, xxvi). In the 14th c., what is defined as Ashkenazi tradition had emerged, with the distinction in pronunciation between *kamets* and *patakh*, the postvocalic *t* pronounced [s] and the shift of accent from the ultimate to the penultimate syllable.

Ashkenazi Hebrew developed side by side with Yiddish, the language of everyday communication. However, together with Ashkenazi pronunciation of Hebrew, there were Hebrew elements integrated with the phonological system of Yiddish or dialects of Yiddish. Among the characteristic features of this phenomenon is the shift *a>e*, when *a* is left unaccented: *mishpaKHA > mishPOkhe* and also *barukh ha-ba > beroKHAbe*. According to M. Weinreich's proposal (see Jacobs 2005: 44), the pronunciation of Hebrew texts in Ashkenaz should be called Whole Ashkenazi Hebrew, and the Hebrew integrated with Yiddish systems Merged Hebrew. Harshav (2006: 75–76) indicates that one more distinction may be added here, namely Practical Ashkenazi Hebrew as opposed to Ideal

Ashkenazi Hebrew. The author assumes that in fact the pronunciation of Hebrew in the Ashkenazi world may to some extent be influenced by Merged Hebrew. Some characteristic features of Merged Hebrew might have then appeared in the pronunciation of Hebrew texts.

We will try to apply some of these phonetic phenomena and reconstruct a possible sounding of the inscription on the cross guard of the sword. Before that we would like to make one more assumption: not the whole inscription placed on the side of the cross-guard is in Hebrew. The last two letters on one side of the cross-guard announce the text on the other side. Thus, CN is continued and developed as CON. The three subsequent letters, namely CIT, may refer rather to Latin *concito* [?] (in the sense of "to summon") than to any Hebrew word (as also proposed by Sadowski). Now we may expect the quotation of the "names" announced on the face side of the cross guard. If this assumption is correct, all we should expect as Hebrew words are those names (and not verbs).

Before analyzing the names, we should recall and bear in mind the fact that the Hebrew words were transmitted orally by a Yiddish/Hebrew speaker to a Christian scribe or to the questioning person. The latter again wrote it down for the armourer. At least two stages in the process of transmission are "not Hebrew" and this fact might have brought about many misreadings, although limited by what may be called a homophonic proximity.

1) OMON This form seems to be relatively easy to explain. The closest Hebrew word is *'amon*, which means "Faithful". In standard or ideal Ashkenazi pronunciation *kamets* is realized as *o*, resulting in *omon*. The problem is that in ideal Ashkenazi Hebrew the word would sound like *omoyn*. The form *omon*, without the diphthong *oy*, may be a result of some mistakes in transmission, or the simple fact that the letter <i> was omitted or dropped. In the Merged Hebrew version one would expect *omen* (analogically to *sholem*).
2) EEVE. The form is quite difficult to interpret. What seems improbable is that it is the ineffable Name of God. Were it to be so, it would have been written in the form of IAHVEH or similar, as this name was well known in the Christian world. There is here some homophonic similarity with standard Hebrew *ahava* "love". The change *a>e* in all the three cases of the appearance of *a* seems strange. Ideal Ashkenazi pronunciation would be *a(h)ovo*, with an optionally pronounced [h]. On the other hand, in Merged Hebrew the pronunciation *a(h)ave* is testified (Niborski 1999). We may assume here the misinterpretation *aave* as *eeve* (on the basis of vowel syncharmonism) or even a possible dialectal pronunciation *eeve*.
3) SEDALAI. Here we would like to recall the interpretation proposed by Muchowski (and disproved by him): *se* "a lamb", *alay* < *elay* < *elo(h)ay* / *elo(h)ey* "my God" or "God", with *de*, an Aramaic relative pronoun or genitive marker commonly used in mediaeval Hebrew. The resulting meaning would then be: "The Lamb of [my] God".
4) EBREhEL. Here we suggest one serious emendation: EBEREhEL = DEBREhEL. The omission of the initial voiced consonant also occurs in Hebrew itself, namely in the Hebrew of amoraim, where we have *abayt* instead of *babayt* (Breuer 2002: 8). The omission of initial *d* is rather not testified, but probable on the same grounds. If so, two possible interpretations emerge. Firstly, *(d)ebre* < *dabra*, i.e. Aramaic status emphaticus of *dabar* "a word", where the already mentioned shift *a>e* occurs.

Secondly, *dibre(y)*, which is a plural construct form of the same *dabar*. The final element – *(h[a])el* "(the) God" – does not pose any difficulties. The resulting meaning would then be "The Word of God" or "The Words of God". One serious problem is posed by this interpretation – the lack of spirantisation of phoneme *b*. In effect we have *dabar* instead of the expected *davar*. Here we are dealing with a hypercorrect pronunciation of Hebrew, characteristic, however, of some transliterations of Hebrew in Septuagint followed then in Christian translations of the Bible. Not only that. The Aramaic form *dabra* functioned, as testified by the popular formula *abra ka-dabra*.

Our proposal suffers a kind of inconsistency as far as Ashkenazi pronunciation is concerned. In the case of OMON we assume the Ideal Ashkenazi pronunciation (without diphthongization *o*, however), while when interpreting EEVE and EBREhEL we propose the Merged Hebrew pronunciation. One could argue that we are dealing with Practical Ashkenazi Hebrew. What is also possible is that more than one Yiddish/Hebrew informant was involved. As to the presence of spirantised *b* ([v]) in one case and the lack of it in the other, it may be ascribed to a popular sounding of the Aramaic rather than Hebrew noun.

Our interpretation is borne out by the idea of the symmetrical construction of the ornaments present on the hilt. Four Evangelists *vis à vis* four Names of God. Moreover, those names in the proposed interpretation may be linked with the Christian tradition: "The Faithful Shepherd", "Love", "The Lamb of the Lord" and "The Word of the Lord". Especially the last two find support in the illustrative material, as The Lamb of the Lord is depicted on both sides of the grip, while the Evangelists are immediately connected with the Word of God.

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