The Text and the World: The Henryków Book, Its Authors, and their Region, 1160-1310

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The Cistercian abbey of Henryków in Silesia, settled in 1227, is perhaps best known to medievalists primarily because of the *Henryków Book*, a codex compiled c.1310, containing two narratives of the abbey's (and region's) history from c.1160 to the date of compilation of the codex, as well as a list of the bishops of Wrocław and a number of charters embedded within the narrative histories. Each of the narratives contains a number of 'accounts' (*rationes*), which describe the histories of individual localities – inheritances, villages, manors, or estates – that together comprise the monastery's holdings. The *Henryków Book* (hereafter simply the *Book*) has long been used by scholars as a source for the history of Silesia, and reached a broader audience in the excellent translation by Piotr Górecki, published in 2007, which includes an extensive introduction and notes.⁽¹⁾ In the book under review, Górecki – who is probably the most prolific scholar working in English on medieval Polish history, and who has devoted much of his life to the study of the *Book* and its context – provides a painstakingly thorough close reading of the *Book*, and an analysis of what it, in conjunction with other (primarily documentary evidence) can tell us about the history of one part of Silesia in this period. This is micro-history at its best, presenting us with a deep insight into a local world of monks, aristocrats, peasants, rulers, and townspeople; and the various threads – of patronage, commerce, violence, religion, narrative, and memory – that bound them together in the 13th century, a time of far-reaching transition in this area (just as it was in other European regions).

Górecki takes his lead in identifying objects of study from the *Book* itself: if something is a significant preoccupation of the two authors of the *Book*'s narrative accounts, it is equally an important subject in the book presently under review. These subjects include, in the first instance, the foundation of the monastery and the consolidation(s) of its estate(s) over time; but also encompass the transition from oral memory to written record, growing urbanisation, increasing German settlement and a concomitant rise in the use of the German vernacular, and the relationships of law and patronage between the various actors of these narratives. The overarching theme that emerges from this range of topics could be encapsulated in the phrase 'property and power': the access of the monastery (and others) to property, primarily in the form of land, the relations of power that enable or obstruct that access, and the ways in which both that access and the relations of power were negotiated and codified in law, deed, and writing.

The first part of this monograph is a very close reading of the two narrative accounts of the book, looking first at the evidence of authorship and authors' biographies, and then the appeal in the *Book* to the past as a legal resource, before turning to how the shift from 'memory to written record' is itself thematised in this text, and the ways in which reading this book – now with increasing recourse also to other, external evidence – allows us to reconstruct 'communities of memory and knowledge'.⁽²⁾ The second part of this book turns in greater detail to the documentary evidence not recorded in the *Book* to provide a deeper examination of the foundation and consolidation of the monastic estate, and the larger worlds inhabited by Abbot Peter (the author of the first narrative in the *Book*) and his anonymous later continuator: worlds peopled by, in Peter's lifetime, primarily a network of landed nobility and local, more-or-less independent landowners, and later on increasingly by lesser (and often violent) knights, townsmen, and German settlers. Overall, Górecki provides a rich description of the nature of social, economic, and legal relations within this region and period that will take its place among the best examples of social and economic history of the past generation of scholarship, both from the perspective of results, and – equally important – that of method.

Górecki's method is – deceptively – simple. After a discussion of the mixed genre of the book – it is a hybrid of the monastic history cultivated by the Cistercians, and the *liber traditionum* or *donationum*, long used by monasteries to record their holdings acquired through gift – he provides a very close analysis of all statements made by the authors regarding their own biographies. Abbot Peter's mentions of himself provide the chronological framework for the earlier history presented in the *Book* (and this book), which goes back to the memories of people encountered, in the process of the monastery's foundation, by Peter himself, and by his informants, thus stretching back to the second half of the 12th century. Peter's biography, insofar as it exists in the *Book*, shows him in the role of facilitator: of transactions to acquire and retain property; and of the memory of such transactions, through the writing of the *Book*, for much the same purpose. The foundation of the abbey was contingent on the agreement of a number of actors, ranging from the person Peter wishes to claim as their principal patron, the notary Nicholas, to the dukes of Wrocław; and the process of its foundation was a complicated one requiring, it appears from Peter's account, a great deal of mediation. Almost nothing is known of the continuator, but Peter's story provides enough context to understand the purpose of the *Book*: to set down for posterity a record of how the monastery's estate came into being as a means of preserving it from threat in the future, at a time in which, according to Peter, because of a general decay of trust, the written word is so much more important than it had been in the past.

Thus the past, and specifically the written record of the past and the transactions taking place in that past, is thematised within the *Book* itself as a 'legal resource' and 'work of persuasion' (p. 29). For Abbot Peter, what was important was recording an oral legal testament in writing: he provides direct speech utterances of a number of people as his primary source of evidence to back up his claims regarding the monastery's possessions and foundation. This includes a lengthy narrative about the various negotiations that led to that foundation, in which Peter is at pains to demonstrate the primacy of Nicholas as its agent – something that even from Peter's presentation would appear to have been debated; and Górecki, after his close analysis of this narrative, provides other, alternative versions from the documentary material that suggest other traditions in which Nicholas had a much less important role to play. But Peter's purpose was not solely to provide a history of the abbey's foundation; it was also to make a moral point about the probity and rectitude of times past versus the decay of the present, at all levels of society from the dukes down, after the disruptions of the Mongol invasions of 1241 (during which time the monks had to flee the abbey, and then return and rebuild it and reclaim usurped – according to Peter – lands). It is not least this decay that necessitates the writing of this book, in a time when trust falters and only parchment can provide some measure of protection. (Although not a single charter actually states that the written word outweighs its alternatives, increasing recourse to it suggests that it was increasingly seen as at least as important.) Peter's continuator lives in a different world: he refers to memory rarely, and provides few instances of direct speech; his evidence is more derived, already, from the written record. For Peter, the mode of transmission of knowledge was in itself a subject worth noting, since it had changed over his lifetime; for the continuator, it was not worth a mention. This shift in attitude is itself evidence of a move from memory to written record, supported also by the examination of the documentary evidence external to the *Book*.

When moving on to the theme of memory and writing, Górecki begins to introduce other evidence of the shift to a written record, and now proceeds from just a close reading of a narrative text (the *Book*), to an analysis informed not least by sheer numbers. We learn about the numbers of charters and other diplomatic material issued in different periods, and the relative numbers issued by different actors; the numbers of people witnessing them and the percentages that belonged to different social strata and performed this task once or many times; the localities most recorded in charter material; the number of times the extant charters refer to particular kinds of social groupings (such as 'barons' or 'knights' or 'citizens'; 'peasants' are, sadly, for the most part absent); and a wealth of other such data. It is apparent that the written word was *already*, in the early 13th century, an important source of proof – more so than Peter would admit; but equally, it is clear that Peter's perception of an increasing significance granted to the written record is supported by the extant evidence of that record. And this conclusion is also supported indirectly by the fact the continuator, unlike Peter, 'wrote nothing about writing as a discreet [sic!] subject' (p. 60), while providing a number of examples of writing as an activity – including the correction of the written record – without any particular comment on the noteworthiness or otherwise of such an activity. This lack of comment corresponds to an increasing standardisation of the formal aspects of the charter material, as well as of units of measurement, over time.

Thus Górecki concludes that what is evident (whether explicit or not) in the *Book* is also reflected in the extant documentary record; a number of charters, like the continuator, also record the consultation and emendation of earlier documents, and in many cases thus suggest that the reason for writing – which is also the reason why Peter and his continuator wrote their portions of the *Book* – is because earlier knowledge, whether written or (in the case of Peter's narrative) oral, was contested, or faulty, and needed to be set right. Hence the processes both of writing, and of standardisation of the written record. These processes also expose, however, the fact that the written record was itself as much a site of contestation as oral testimony, even as there was a turn to writing precisely in order to minimise the risk of disputes. Górecki also advances the interesting suggestion – surely worth further analysis – that there is a 'nuanced connection between German settlement and writing' (p. 148).

The world of the *Book* was a world of productive lands, and of people who worked those lands and disposed over them. The *Book* gives us detailed narratives of the histories of its lands, with the purpose of

demonstrating from those histories how the properties became part of the monastery's estate. Over the course of the century, the whole estate underwent a process of 'compacting', consolidating holdings closer together, exchanging distant holdings for nearer ones, and thereby building up a more easily manageable productive estate. This took place through series of facilitations by various people, from Abbot Peter himself to the knight (Albert the Bearded) who became the monastery's advocate, as well as the often laborious process of negotiating disputes over land and the control of it. Apart from arable land, the properties included forests, fishponds, and increasingly also mills (interestingly, millers were without exception Germans), and all of these were objects of dispute for one reason or another; over time, forest recedes in importance to arable, and aquatic resources of various kinds – like mills – become more prominent in the *Book* and the charter material. A further change over time is the increasing importance of urban revenues – and of urban actors, whether as facilitators or witnesses or disputants – in both the narrative and charter record. These properties and revenues are themselves increasingly acquired through a process of purchase – for money – rather than by gift: while Peter records only eight purchases, against 11 gifts (of a total of 22 acquisitions), his continuator records no gifts, and 42 purchases. All of these changes are evident equally (if in differing proportions and with variable emphasis) in the *Book* and in the extant charters.

There is much that can be learned from this book. In the first instance, it is a lesson in how to do micro-history or local history; any postgraduate looking to write a dissertation on local social or economic history, or a history of a single landowner's estates, or a history of an individual monastery, ought to include this book as a part of an essential library of methodological approaches to such an undertaking. Górecki's book offers, to cite his words regarding the *Book*, 'an exceptionally rich entrée into a number of subjects [...]: texts and how they work, generic classification and its limits, medieval authorship, memory and oblivion, lordship, power, communities, social groups, economy, and demography' (p. 257). He is insightful on all of these topics, and his book is an excellent case study of these histories within the context of one micro-region and one set of sources.

Beyond this, however, it is a little difficult to assess the larger value of this book – not because it has little such value, but rather because the author deliberately and explicitly wishes to avoid generalisation of any sort. Attempting to place the various transitions Górecki identifies in his sources within a larger explanatory framework would, as he says, have led to a very different book – 'one about lordship, society, techniques, and economic transition between the twelfth and the early fourteenth century' (p. 223). This is, as he reminds us, a book he has in fact written, which, however, stops c.1250.⁽³⁾ (Such a book might also have provided us with some further details lacking in the present volume, for example the sizes of peasant holdings – *mansi* or hides; the relative proportions of different kinds of rent – in kind or in cash; the burden of the rent in terms of how much those sums identified as dues were worth in labour or commodities; levels of productivity, market involvement, and market dependence.) Here, his purpose seems to be rather different, and at first sight rather more cautious. It is of course always hard to privilege both the myriad local differences that arise from any study of any specific source concerning any single micro-region, as well as the larger perspective of change across Europe over the centuries. This is possibly even more difficult with regard to certain regions. As Górecki rightly points out, perhaps especially with regard to (parts of) East-Central Europe, the few local studies that exist in English tend to be seen as standing in for the whole of very large and diverse regions, of which they are either unrepresentative, or representative only in part: 'historiographical synthesis [regarding this macro-region], above all in English, has tended, more than its counterparts concerning other regions of Europe, to reduce complex realities in the past to some one, specific, usually closely examined but conceptually isolated, aspect of those realities' (p. 254).

Górecki thus – paradoxically as he himself admits – focuses in his conclusion not on the 'big picture' that could emerge from his study, but rather on its limitations. This caution is admirable, and fully justified; but as someone who does not work on this region, my interest in Górecki's work – and that of many of the readers of this review, I suspect – is not just in reading an excellent local history with no greater consequence for my own work, or my understanding of medieval European history more broadly. And given Górecki's demonstrated interest in and ability to formulate more general conclusions, evidenced in the volume of his publications on Poland and east-central Europe over the past three decades, he is the best-

qualified person to have taken further his own work to provide us with more of an overarching narrative along with the engrossing micro-history of this book.⁽⁴⁾ One can't help wishing he had done so, and hoping that such a larger, more ambitious work will soon be forthcoming.

In the meantime – since Górecki is such an amiable man – I shall risk his disapproval by essaying some generalisations of my own rather broader than those he himself is willing to put his name to. What Górecki shows is that in this part of Poland in the 13th century, we can witness a set of transitions that coincide and arguably are interdependent, and are, equally, comparable (though by no means identical to) similar shifts in practice that took place in much of western Europe. It appears to me that in his example, the transitions start somewhat later, but take place rather faster, whereas in, say, France, Germany, and England, much of the process of change began already by c.1100 at the latest, though the extent to which it had progressed further than in Silesia by the early 14th century is probably debatable. (To cite one example: Michael Clanchy's *From Memory to Written Record*, an explicit inspiration for one of the themes of this book, has as its terminal dates 1066 and 1307; Górecki covers a similar transition between 1160 and 1310.) These transitions have to do with an increasing formalisation of law at the level of everyday practice through the use of the written record, which begins to be held as the more acceptable form of evidence and – in Silesia, as elsewhere – displaces oral witnessing and perambulations of boundaries as forms of settling the bounds of properties and fixing the outcome of legal proceedings (for example), though it remains the case that the record of oral witnessing is an integral part of the written document. Literate practice goes hand in hand with both growing urbanisation, and the concomitant commercialisation of rural societies: the turn to money rents seems as evident here as elsewhere in western Europe, and the tentacles of small towns reach everywhere in the social relations recorded in the *Book* by 1310 in a manner not visible a century before that. All of this is in turn enabled by and itself enables demographic growth, a great expansion of arable cultivation, and what appears to be increasing competition over resources – manifest not least in the rise of a class of (often) violent knights who usurp authority from the dukes (and the monasteries), destroy resources rather than giving up revenues from them, and apparently exercise an oppressive power over the rural population, eventually, in at least one case, managing to undergo a transformation from a more-or-less threatening figure for the monastery to its legitimate advocate. This sort of 'social climbing' (p. 172) is reminiscent not least of some of the issues much discussed in the debates on the so-called 'feudal revolution' of the late tenth to the early 12th centuries in parts of western Europe – a process that seems to be rather more telescoped in this region.⁽⁵⁾

These are all developments that in the German-speaking lands (my own region of specialisation), have already begun by the early 12th century at the latest, in many cases a century earlier; and, give or take a half-century, this chronology is shared equally by much of France, England, and the Low Countries (the regions with which I am most familiar). By c.1300, things seem to be settling down a bit into a new order in most of these places; and while the 14th century falls outside Górecki's remit, it would appear to be the case that Silesia in that period is also, in many respects, quite comparable to western Europe.⁽⁶⁾ The evidence of Górecki's monograph thus suggests, first, that the old paradigm of a 'backward' eastern Europe, still sometimes encountered in non-specialist Anglophone scholarship, is not really tenable. More significantly, it suggests that in terms of understanding socio-economic change, similar forces were at work in Silesia as in Bavaria or Norfolk (for example), and to the extent that the precise situations varied across regions, at least with regard to the larger socio-economic outcomes of transition, institutional, legal, political, and even 'ethnic' difference probably mattered less than has often been supposed. What we need to do, therefore, is turn back to the basics, and having identified the similarities in transitions during the central Middle Ages, begin to start identifying how, despite so many differences in various respects, these similarities could exist: what were the common causal factors?

These general conclusions of mine, based on Górecki's rather more specific concluding remarks with regard to Henryków, suggest to me another reason why this book is so important. The author's caution notwithstanding, he provides an invaluable further piece of evidence towards understanding one of the great processes of change taking place across much of Europe during the Middle Ages: a transition from local societies that were more self-sufficient and less market-involved, more informal and less codified in their

social and legal norms and relations, to societies that, even at the level of the village, were less local, more involved in and sometimes dependent on regional or larger networks of exchange and commerce, and (not least for this reason) also more anchored within more formal, written modes of setting norms and settling disputes. And if we can indeed generalise from this example, it also seems to be the case – as we can see often enough in modern societies – that processes that in some regions might have taken two or three centuries in some regions might elsewhere bring a society to a similar state in half that amount of time.

Górecki states that he deliberately avoids trying to bridge the distance between Henryków and the wider world – apparent in the *Book* in its overwhelming concern with the local, and general ignorance of larger European contexts – by going against the grain of the *Book* and fitting it within the context of a concept of ‘East-Central Europe’ and processes of ‘colonization’, ‘frontiers’, or ‘Europeanization’ (p. 258), and has chosen instead to do so by means of a rich analysis of the subjects the *Book* throws up, from within the *Book* and its immediate evidentiary context. Rightly, he feels that we need to view the history of this region as part of a history of Europe, not as a special and very different category of its own – and I would agree, with one caveat, and one remark that goes rather further than anything Górecki (explicitly) suggests; neither of these have directly to do with the immediate subjects of this book, but do, to my mind, arise from these framing remarks of its author.

The first is that it is not very clear where Europe ends; while we might all be able to agree about Silesia being a part of ‘Europe’ (rather than specifically ‘East-Central Europe’), we do need both to acknowledge, and understand, gradations of difference in historical processes within Europe – something Górecki is entirely open to, of course – as well as the fact that at some point (which might be further west of the Urals?) it might be wise to accept that a qualifying adjective applied to ‘Europe’ would indeed be appropriate. The concluding remark I wish to make has to do with what we might call almost the other end of Europe from that discussed here: if ‘East-Central Europe’ has been a special category we should now avoid because it really is just one more example – however much it is in itself specific, different, and irreducible to general principles at the level of detail, like the example of any other European region – of trends in historical development across all or most of Europe in this period, perhaps historians of England, particularly those concerned with social and economic history, might be inspired by works such as the book under review to view their own local histories as being also less special, for completely different reasons, than they have normally supposed them to be. Silesia and England were two points (and not necessarily two ends!) on a continuum of social and economic transformation across medieval Europe that arguably have as much in common as they do markers of difference; we need to understand *both* within a European context, rather than as outliers, even if for very different reasons.

Rather than setting this book within a debate on how this region of Europe became – or did not become – ‘European’, Górecki has followed his ‘yearning [...] for a conceptualization of places, peoples, and processes we call Europe along two lines: by means of a uniform level of conceptual attention to the texts, and the worlds, comprising the Continent in its entirety; and, as a result, by a gradual retreat from qualifying adjectives’ (p. 259). The result is a micro-history that is very specific to one region, but can – as I hope my own very cursory attempts at providing a broader context also show – equally well be placed within a larger European context: there is really no need for a qualifying adjective, and saying so does not deny the specificity of this micro-region. Górecki succeeds magnificently in providing us with a history of a European monastic institution that can serve as an example of European history within a larger, overarching framework that encompasses many regions of Europe east and west; and while I must reiterate my hope that he will also provide us with more on that overarching framework, this book is in itself already an outstanding achievement.

Notes

1. A Local Society in Transition: The “Henryków Book” and Related Documents (Toronto, 2007). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. The second phrase is from one of Górecki’s chapter titles; the first, used often by Górecki in this book,

is the title of Michael Clanchy's monograph, to which Górecki explicitly and repeatedly acknowledges his debt: *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307* (Oxford, 1993).[Back to \(2\)](#)

3. *Economy, Society, and Lordship in Medieval Poland, 1100–1250* (New York, NY, 1992).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Górecki lists no less than 23 items (not including his doctoral dissertation, and encyclopaedia entries and book reviews) under his own name in his bibliography, which are indispensable for scholars (such as myself) lacking Polish and wishing to be informed about that part of Europe. Of this extensive bibliography, see especially the following works: 'Viator to ascriptitius: rural economy, lordship, and the origins of serfdom in medieval Poland', *Slavic Review*, 42 (1984), 14–35; *Parishes, Tithes, and Society in Earlier Medieval Poland, ca.1100–1250* (Philadelphia, PA, 1993); 'Communities of legal memory in medieval Poland, c1200–1240', *Journal of Medieval History*, 24 (1998), 127–54. 'Words, concepts, and phenomena: knighthood, lordship, and the early Polish nobility, c. 1100–c.1350', in *Nobles and Nobility in Medieval Europe: Concepts, Origins, Transformations*, ed. by Anne J. Duggan (Woodbridge, 2000), pp. 115–55; 'Medieval Poland in its world, then and today', in *East-Central Europe in European History*, ed. by Jerzy K?oczowski and Hubert ?askiewicz (Lublin, 2009), pp. 157–92; 'Ambiguous beginnings: East Central Europe in the making, 950–1200', in *European Transformations: The Long Twelfth Century*, ed. by Thomas F. X. Noble and John van Engen (Notre Dame, 2012), pp. 194–228.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. On similar social climbing by a (new) class of knights in Germany, see e.g. Benjamin Arnold, *Princes and Territories in Medieval Germany* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 82–6, *et passim*; specifically on Bavaria, see also Philippe Dollinger, *Der bayerische Bauernstand vom 9. bis zum 13. Jahrhundert*, trans. Ursula Irsigler (Munich, 1982). I have earlier discussed the larger issues connected with the 'feudal revolution' in this forum; see my review essay at <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1651> [2], with further references also of relevance to the present volume under review.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See Richard C. Hoffmann, *Land, Liberties and Lordship in a Late Medieval Countryside: Agrarian Structures and Change in the Duchy of Wroc?aw* (Philadelphia, PA, 1989).[Back to \(6\)](#)

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