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STANISŁAW KOSTKA POTOCKI ON THE ART OF ANCIENT INDIA

An interesting contribution to the beginnings of oriental studies in Poland was made by Stanisław Kostka Potocki (1755-1821) in a work entitled „O sztuce u dawnych czyli Winkelmann polski” [On the Art of the Ancients or the Polish Winckelmann], vols. I-III, published in Warsaw in 1815¹. It used to remain neglected by the oriental philologists and scholars investigating the history of Polish interest in the Orient, though it was always greatly appreciated by the archaeologists and historians of art².

Chapter V of the mentioned work is titled „O sztuce u Indianów”³ [On the Art of Indians] and it is the first time that this problem is expressed in Polish. It should be also stressed here, that the original German edition of Winckelmann's work („Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums”, Dresden 1764), on which Potocki based to a considerable degree, does not contain such a chapter. Potocki is to be merited thus, among others, for the enrichment of his perspective of the history of ancient art with considerations on such civilizations as Indian and Chinese, and for the noteworthy extension (compared to Winckelmann) of the chapters devoted to the art of ancient Egypt, Phoenicia, Palestine, Babylon and Persia. In spite of a compilatory character of these observations, they constitute an important stage in our literature of the ancient cultures of the said areas. Potocki does not confine himself merely to the considerations on art, with historical, geographical, astronomical and cultural observations simply prevailing. This is also the case in the chapter devoted to India.

The sources used by Potocki are the following, then accessible works: Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil Duperron, „Recherches historiques et géographiques sur l'Inde”, Paris 1786 (one of his main sources); Robert Orme, „A History of the Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan from 1745”, vols. I-III, Madras 1763-1778; Alexander Dow, „The History of Hindostan from the Earliest Account of Time to the Death of Akbar” [Tarik-i Ferishta], vols. I-II, London 1768; Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, „A Code of Gentoo Laws, or, Ordinations of the Pundits, from a Persian Translation, Made from the Original Written in the Shanscrit Language”, London 1777; James Rennel, „Description historique et géographique de l'Indoustan”, Paris 1782; Jean Sylvian Bailly, „Histoire de l'astronomie indienne et orientale”, Paris 1787; William Robertson, „Recherches historiques sur la connaissance que les anciens avaient de l'Inde”, Paris 1792.

He also used the following descriptions and reports of journeys: Jean Thévenot, „Voyages de M. Thévenot tant en Europe qu'en Asie et en Afrique”, vols. I-V, Paris 1684; John Ovington, in: „Histoire générale de voyages”, vol. 33, Paris 1751, pp. 80—151; Carsten Niebuhr, „Description de l'Arabie”, Paris 1772; idem, „Voyages en Arabie et aux pays voisins”, Paris 1774—1778; Pierre Sonnerat, „Voyages aux Indes orientales et a la Chine de 1774 a 1781”, Paris 1782—1806; William Hodges, „Travels in India during the years 1780, 1781, 1782 and 1783”, London 1793; John A. Fryer, „Account of East India and Persia, Being Nine Years' Travels, 1672—1681”, London 1798.

Having based on the quoted records and descriptions, Potocki devoted more attention to such centres as Benares, Elephanta, Salsetta, Ellura and Puri (temple of Vishnu-Jagganatha). He attempts to describe their architectural and artistic peculiarities (mainly sculptural) in a possibly detailed way, furthermore submitting them to some aesthetical evaluation⁴.

Apart from the monumental works of art, Potocki also mentions Indian glyptics, having suggested that „the Indians are the inventors of the stone engraving art”⁵.

It seems apparent, that the presence of Stanisław Kostka Potocki should be indispensably taken into account, also in initial development stages of Indian studies in Poland. His description precedes the two works hitherto situated⁶ in the primes of this branch in this country: by Walenty Skorochód Majewski (1816)⁷ and Joachim Lelewel (1820)⁸. Not only the date of publication, but also the contents and the character of considerations presented in the chapter dedicated to India's art in his „Polish Winckelmann”, fully justify this fact.

NOTES:

¹ Cf. recent re-edition by J. Śliwa and J. Ostrowski, with their commentary and notes: Stanisław Kostka Potocki, *O sztuce u dawnych czyli Winkelman polski*, vols. I-IV, Warszawa-Kraków 1992, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

² Potocki is unanimously recognized in Polish science as the „father” of our mediterranean studies and of the history of art. Cf. the description of Potocki's activity in the above quoted publication, Vol. I, pp. XV—XXIX (with the bibliography listed there, pp. XXX—XXXIII).

³ The above quoted publication, Vol. I, pp. 185—214.

⁴ It should be also remarked, that in the discussed work, Potocki displayed reliable knowledge of ancient sources relating to India (he refers, among others, to the following authors: Eratosthenes, Megasthenes, Ptolemy, Dio Cassius).

⁵ Potocki, *O sztuce u dawnych czyli Winkelman polski*, vol. I, p. 208 (note G) refers to the opinion of Rudolph Erich Raspe *Catalogue raisonné d'une collection générale des pierres gravées*, vol. I, London 1791.

⁶ H. Willman-Grabowska, *Indianistyka w Polsce i studia jej pokrewne*, [in:] *Szkice z dziejów polskiej orientalistyki*, part I, edited by Stefan Strelcyn, Warszawa 1957, pp. 237—250 (esp. pp. 238—241). Regrettably, the once announced work by H. Willman-Grabowska and M. Lewicki, that was to appear within the framework of the history of Polish science [*Historia Nauki Polskiej w Monografiach* (History of Polish Science in Monographs)] and to be published by the Polish Academy of Science and Letters, has never appeared, and the above cited text by H. Willman-Grabowska, probably constitutes only a kind of outline for the then prepared volume.

⁷ Walenty Skorochód Majewski, *O Sławianach i ich pobratymcach* [About Slavs and their kinsmen], part I, including: „O języku sanskryckim, tudzież o literaturze Indyan w tymże języku” [About the sanscrit language, as well as, about the literature of Indians written in this language], Warszawa 1816.

⁸ Joachim Lelewel, *Dzieje starożytne Indji ze szczególnym zastanowieniem się nad wpływem jaki mieć mogła na strony zachodnie* (Dodatek do *Dziejów Starożytnych*) [The history of ancient India with a special reflection on its influence, which it could have had on the western parts (Supplement to Ancient History)], Warszawa 1820.