

## **ON THE LOGO OF THE CRACOW MAYA CONFERENCE AND THE ETYMOLOGY OF KRAKÓW**

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### **Abstract**

Since 2011, the Cracow Maya Conference has been organised and hosted by staff and students of the Institute of Archaeology of the Jagiellonian University. Whereas this annual event is focused on Maya cultures, Mesoamerican cultures are also increasingly represented in recent years. This conference has as its purpose to convene European scholars and to disseminate information pertaining to ancient Mesoamerican cultures, their archaeology, writing and iconography to interested students and *aficionados*, via a series of lectures and workshops. The logo that has been developed for the conference, serves to embody the union of ancient Maya writing and the wonderful locality where the conference is convened. Here the origin and meaning of the logo are explained in further detail.

### **Resumen**

Desde 2011, la Conferencia de Mayistas de Cracovia ha sido organizada y recibida por el personal y los estudiantes del Instituto de Arqueología de la Universidad Jaguelónica. Mientras que este encuentro anual tiene como su enfoque central las culturas mayas, en años recientes las culturas mesoamericanas también se representan. Esta conferencia tiene como su propósito de convocar a académicos europeos y de diseminar información referente a las antiguas culturas mesoamericanas, su arqueología, escritura y iconografía entre los estudiantes y los aficionados interesados, vía una serie de ponencias y de talleres. El logotipo que se ha desarrollado para la conferencia, sirve para personificar la unión entre la escritura de los antiguos mayas y el maravilloso lugar en donde se convocan la conferencia. Aquí el origen y el significado del logotipo se explican de manera detallada.

### **A LITTLE BACKGROUND**

One evening, during the first Cracow Maya Conference, a small group of workshop tutors and local organisers, met for a few drinks at the aptly named *Pierwszy lokal na Stolarskiej po lewej stronie idąc od Małego Rynku* ('First Place on Stolarska on the left side, while going away from the Mały Rynek ['small market']'), or the 'The Long Name Bar' for the faint-hearted. During this festive evening there was much talk about the event the following year, which would formally mark the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cracow Maya Conference and as such, part of a series of annual events. It was at this juncture that the idea of elaborating a logo was put on the proverbial table. Several ideas were thrown around, but that which all present cheerfully endorsed was the sketch, quickly rendered on a napkin, representing the first draft of the logo we now know (Figure 1).



**Fig. 1:** The logo of the Cracow Maya Conference with the transliterations of the glyphic signs (drawing by Christophe Helmke).

The logo is a combination of four glyphs of the Classic Maya hieroglyphic writing system, including three logograms (word signs) and a phonogram (sound sign) (Figure 1). Together these can be transliterated as **KAL-wi-K'AK'-CHAPAT**, to be transcribed and read as *kalaaw k'ahk' chapaht*. The glyphs used for the logo are part of lengthier texts found on a vase discovered in 2010 in a remote cave in Belize, named Cuychen. Each of the four glyphic signs employed in the logo are found on the actual Cuychen vase, although these are here combined in a novel way. Cuychen relates to the Cracow Maya Conference in that the results of the archaeological investigations at the cave were first presented at this conference (Helmke *et al.* 2011) and the accompanying iconography and epigraphy of the vessel was described during the intermediate workshop co-tutored by Christophe Helmke and Harri Kettunen (2011). The logo owes not only its style to the glyphs found on the Cuychen vessel, but also the heretofore unattested antipassive inflection of the verb *kal* 'to hack, axe', written with the **wi** syllabogram, cueing the suffix *-aaw*. If this exceptional spelling were not stunning enough, it was rendered in three separate captions on this unique vase! A brief analysis of *kalaaw*, allows us to propose the morphological segmentation *kal-aaw-Ø*, the analysis *axe-APASS-3SA*, and the literal translation 'axes-he'. Here, as in the original text, we have an object-incorporating verbal construction, which means that the direct object of the clause is integrated into the verb. In this case the object is the *k'ahk' chapaht*, literally a 'fire centipede', a neologism for the Old World term 'dragon', that is evidently lacking in the known corpus of Maya texts. Here, however, we should not think of small centipedes, but instead of monstrous serpentine and partly skeletonised mythic beats, since this is how the ancient Maya conceived these creatures (see Taube 2003: 406-418; Kettunen and Davis 2004). All in all, the logo can thus be read as *kalaaw k'ahk' chapaht* and literally translated as 'axes fire-centipede him' or in freer prose: 'he slays the dragon'. But who is this figure who is said to slay the dragon? For this we need to turn to the founding mythology of Cracow, and the etymology of the place name *Kraków*.

### ON THE ETYMOLOGY OF KRAKÓW

The logo refers to mythic times, long before the first historic lords of Poland assumed power, when a legendary Polish prince, named Krak (alternatively also *Krok*, *Krakus*, *Crakus*, *Grakch*, and *Gracchus*), the founder of Cracow, struggled to overcome a terrifying dragon. There are several different sources mentioning the legend of Krak and the famed dragon, usually known as the *Smok Wawelski*, or 'Wawel Dragon'. The first and oldest of them is the *Kronika Polska* ('Polish Chronicle') written by a bishop of Cracow, Master Wincenty Kadłubek (ca. AD 1150-1223). Kadłubek mentions that Krak (whom he refers to by the Latinised form *Gracchus*) was a prince of the Lechitians who

fought against Gauls and after coming to Poland from distant Carinthia became a king and founded a structured and well-organized polity. However, not long after a horrifying dragon (that Kadłubek called a *holophagus*, ‘all-eater’ or ‘całożerca’) settled at the foot of Wawel Hill demanding to be fed cattle each week (Kadłubek 1974: 79) (Figure 2). When the indicated tribute was not delivered the dragon satiated his appetite by devouring people. Krak sent his two sons to kill the dragon, but they were unable to succeed in direct combat and decided instead to prepare a trap, by stuffing a cattle skin with sulphur. When the dragon ate it he suffocated. Having thus killed the dragon, Krak’s sons started to argue as to who exactly had slain the beast. In a bout of blind ambition the younger brother killed his elder and subsequently announced that the dragon was to blame for his demise. Upon the death of Krak, his younger son took throne, but soon thereafter the fratricide was revealed and he was driven from the kingdom. Kadłubek states that in order to acknowledge the achievements of Krak, the people started building a city on the hill in which dragon once dwelled. The new town was named *Gracchovia* (Kraków) after this one great lord. Oddly, the chronicler also offered an alternate folk etymology wherein the name of the city may derive from the cawing of crows that preyed on the carcass of the dragon (Banaszkiewicz 2002: 5-59; Kadłubek 1974: 81). Among the earliest sources to cite the name *Krak* is the anonymous *Kronika Wielkopolska* (‘Upper Poland Chronicle’) dated sometime between the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> and start of the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. The same source derives the name *Krak* from the Latin *corvus*, ‘crow’, and rather saliently omits all mention to the dragon episode. The *Kronika Wielkopolska* is thus an evident rejoinder to the *Kronika Polska* and its alternate avian etymology (see Haefs 2008: 29-30).



**Fig. 2.** Woodcut figure from Sebastian Münster’s *Cosmographia Universalis* (1544), showing the *Smok Wawelski* emerging from his cavernous lair and preying on sheep. Based on present evidence, Münster’s work is the first foreign source to mention the founding myth of Cracow involving the Wawel Dragon. Anachronistically, the acropoline Wawel Castle has already been built atop the summit of Wawel Hill.

However, centuries before the first written mention of any legend involving a dragon-slayer, Cracow had already been founded and from all accounts already bore this name. The earliest source to this effect are the accounts of the chronicler Ibrâhîm ibn Ya'qûb (also known as Abraham ben Jacob) a Sephardic Jew of the Caliphate of Cordoba, who travelled through western and central Europe and reached Prague in 965/966. The work of Ibrâhîm ibn Ya'qûb provides a reliable account of Poland under Mieszko I (ca. AD 940-992), the first historical ruler of Poland. Although his original memoirs and commentaries of his journeys do not survive, references exist in the works of later Arab geographers, which relate the name of Cracow as 'Kraków' or 'Krakowa' and not 'Karako' or 'Krako' as it was previously suggested (Zaborski 2008). The name of the city then appears as *Craccoa* in the *Dagome iudex* (lit. 'Judge Dagome') dated to c. 1080 (Ślupecki 2009: 165; Zaborski 2008: 58) and as <CRACOV> on the reverse of a denarius minted by Władysław I Herman, Duke of Poland (1079-1102) (Künker 2007: 470).<sup>1</sup> From these sources it is clear that the name of the city is firmly rooted in Polish history and precedes Kadłubek's account by several centuries.

The *Kronika ksiąząt polskich* ('The Chronicles of Polish Princes'), written between 1382 and 1386 and attributed to Peter of Byczyna, during the reign of Louis the Great (king of Poland between 1370 and 1382) provides yet another variant of the account of Krak and the dragon. Here it is Krak who is attributed the idea of stuffing the cattle's skin with sulphur to kill the dragon. This version was subsequently followed by the famous Polish chronicler Jan Długosz (AD 1415-1480) in his work entitled the *Annales seu cronicae incliti Regni Poloniae* ('Annals or Famous Chronicles of the Kingdom of Poland') (Długosz 1867, 1961). Moreover, according to the same author, the city of Kraków was founded before the dragon was slaughtered. Thus, we are provided with a different chronology of major events related to the dragon, Krak and the founding of the city (see Deptuła 2003: 35). This tale seems more probable since current archaeological evidence indicates that the earliest human settlement on Wawel Hill dates to the Stone Age. According to this version of the myth, the toponym Kraków involves an archaic possessive form, that can be translated as 'Krak's (place)'. As such then, Cracow is the place where Krak defeated the dragon and Wawel Castle marks the original location of the dragon's lair. To this day in modern folklore, the 276-m long cave at the foot of Wawel Hill, on the bank of the Vistula River is thought to be the lair of the mythic dragon, and is known as *Jaskinia Smocza Jama* ('Dragon's Lair Cave')<sup>2</sup> (e.g. Alth 1877; Duda *et al.* 2010; Firlet 1996; Plezia 1971; Szelerewicz and Górny 1986) (Figure 3).

<sup>1</sup> The denarius in question bears the profile of Władysław I Herman on the obverse accompanied by a rather truncated caption reading <LCAVD . Z'LAVS>. On the reverse, the caption <CRACOV> encircles a depiction of a three-spired church, apparently the Romanesque version of the Wawel Cathedral that was built at this time. This is all the more likely considering the many churches that Władysław I Herman founded, including three dedicated to St. Idzi (St. Giles) in Kraków, Inowłódz and Giebułtów, respectively. Legend also attributes him the founding of a "church on the sand", dedicated to the Virgin Mary, which is thought to be the Church of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (*Kościół Nawiedzenia Najświętszej Maryi Panny*), in Cracow.

<sup>2</sup> According to the report on the excavations conducted in the Smocza Jama by prof. Alth in the 19<sup>th</sup> century he did not find any evidence of prehistoric utilisation nor the remains of Pleistocene animals within the cave. However, Plezia (1971) suggests that people might have found the bones of extinct megafauna in the cave during the Medieval period, which they interpreted as bones of an ancient giant creature, sparking the story of the dragon and using a known biblical account to create the foundational story relating the founding of Cracow.



**Fig. 3.** Map of the limestone cave known as the Jaskinia Smocza Jama, said to be the lair of the Smok Wawelski (map by Christophe Helmke, based on Szelerewicz and Górny 1986).

We should also briefly mention that it was Jan Dąbrówka, professor at the Cracow Academy (later renamed Jagiellonian University), who, in his commentaries to the chronicle of Kadłubek, first published around 1440, associated a huge mound with Krak (Kurtyka 2010-2012: 126). This opinion was followed by Jan Długosz when he suggested that the mound, located on the right bank of the Vistula River, ca. 3 km south of the city centre, in the Podgórze district was identified with Krak (Figure 4). Due to its alleged association, this mound is now called the *Kopiec Krakusa*, or ‘Krakus Mound’, an important tumulus that originally measured ca. 63 m in diameter and as much as 16 m in height (it now measures only 50 m in diameter and a little over 12 m in height, resulting from the reconstruction efforts undertaken in the 1950s) (Słupecki 1999: 78-92; Buko 2008: 150-154). Extensive archaeological excavations have been conducted here between 1934 and 1938, and although legend has it that this is the final resting place of Krak, no tomb or burial chamber has been found (Jamka 1965). The mixture of bone, flint, as well as ceramic and metal artefacts that were recovered from the core, represent haphazard inclusions since these date from the Mesolithic onwards to the Medieval period. The dating of the primary phases of construction is based on an Avar-style belt fitting (a ferrule to be precise) that was discovered in undisturbed strata at a depth of 15 m from the summit, and which dates to the late 8<sup>th</sup> century (Jamka 1965: 217; Słupecki 1999: 89; Buko 2008: 153; Wyrozumski 1999: 52), and on a silver Bohemian denar of Boleslav II (AD 972-999) (Jamka 1965: 223; Słupecki 1999: 90; Buko 2008: 153). These significant artefacts indicate that the mound was constructed sometime between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, during the pre-state or tribal period.



Fig. 4. The Krakus Mound in the Podgórze district of Cracow (photograph by Robert Słaboński).

Among the last historic sources to mention the topic at hand are works of Marcin Bielski (1495-1575). The first of them, the *Kronika Świata* ('The Chronicle of the World'), published in 1551, still associates Krak with slaying the dragon. For the first time, however, it mentions that the dragon's demise was brought about when the dragon burst open from drinking too much water of the Vistula River (Bielski 1551: 161). In another work entitled the *Kronika polska* (not to be confused with Kadłubek's book written four centuries before), edited and published posthumously in 1597 by his son, Jakub, we come across a different version of the legend that credits the death of the dragon to another entirely different individual, a cobbler named Skuba. According to this account, *Crakus* (or *Krok*) acted under the advice of Skuba, to stuff the cattle's skin with sulphur and leave it at the mouth of the cave where dragon had his lair. The passage in question is particularly revealing: 'Krok then ordered the calf's skin to be stuffed with sulphur and to lay it opposite the cave/den in the morning: which he did on the advice of Skuba, a certain shoemaker' (*Kazał tedy Krok nadzieć skórę cielęcą siarką a przeciw jamie położyć rano: co uczynił za radą Skuba, szewca niejakiego* [Bielski 1597: 30]). When the sheep's skin was eaten by the dragon it immediately succumbed to unquenchable thirst and started drinking water from the nearby Vistula River. He drank and drank until he died (Bielski 1597: 30).

Scholars continue to debate the meaning of the legend involving an evil dragon. One might conclude for example that the dragon merely served as a figurehead for evil, darkness and chaos, meanwhile Krak or Krakus was a symbol of law and order as well as cultural hero (Deptuła 2003: 48-49, 52; Strzelczyk 1998: 191). The whole story about the dragon and the fratricidal fight between

Krak's children may also have mythological and cosmological dimensions, especially if we follow the account of Master Wincenty Kadłubek. The beast's defeat followed by death of Krak's son and then of Krak himself – all of which may symbolize a founding sacrifice – give way to the origins of and new city and to the constitution of a new community, in much the same way as other similar foundational myths (Banaszkiewicz 2002: 58-59; Plezia 1971: 32). However, other interpretations are equally probable that stress the historical importance of this tale, assuming that myths can find their origin in societal memory. Some historians have argued that the dragon may symbolize the Avars – the nomadic tribe of Asiatic origins that invaded Europe in 6<sup>th</sup> century and settled in Pannonia, not only interfering with, but also dominating many Slavic tribes (Deptuła 2003: 51; Strzelczyk 1998: 190). Their appearance in the area of present-day Cracow may be confirmed by archaeological discoveries, although such finds may also indicate less bellicose trade contacts between Slavs and Avars. It is also possible that this part of present-day Poland might have been invaded by Avars from time to time and as a result several large strongholds were built for protection in Lower Poland (Kaczanowski and Kozłowski 1998: 338-339; Poleski 2008). In this scenario the cattle devoured by the beast might very well symbolise of the tribute obligations to which the local population was expected to comply. Nevertheless, it is difficult to confirm if subjugation of any type existed in this region between the Slavic inhabitants and the Avars.

Lastly, we should also mention the hypothesis that stipulates that the story involving Krak and the dragon are ultimately derived from the deuterocanonical biblical story of Daniel who killed the Babylonian dragon (Strzelczyk 1998: 190). Similarly, Daniel overcame the dragon by feeding it cakes made of pitch, fat and hair, upon which the monster burst open. In a variant, the dragon is fed camel skins filled with hot coals, and in yet another it is Alexander the Great who is credited with overcoming the monster by feeding it poison and tar (Zimmermann 1958: 439; Plezia 1971), each thereby recalling the version of the myth first presented by Master Wincenty Kadłubek.<sup>3</sup> Were this the case, the latter story would appear as the local Polish adaptation of the famous biblical story or the account of Alexander the Great (Plezia 1971). The connection, or better said syncretism, between Christianity and pagan mythic history remains to this day, when one considers that two of the churches (now sadly in ruins) of Wawel Castle were dedicated respectively to St. George and St. Michael, the paramount dragon-slayers of Christianity (Estreicher 1971; Plezia 1971). Also at the entrance of Wawel Cathedral a collection of "dragon bones" are hung along the walls, and although these may originally have genuinely been thought to represent the remains of the *Smok Wawelski*, it is now clear that these stem from a collection of prehistoric animals (Figure 5). We need not, however, trawl too deep into history, to find tales of monstrous creatures stirring in popular imagination. A case in point is the fascinating episode related by Karol Estreicher (1971): At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a strange dragon-like beast with a white belly and long snout appeared in the Vistula River, close to Wawel Hill. Needless to say, these sightings immediately stimulated a whole series of fabulous stories, chief among them that the Wawel Dragon was swimming once more in the river. Quite by chance, Waław Anczyc (1866-1938) – a bookseller and the owner of one of Cracow's printing houses – came across the creature and killed what appeared to be a small crocodile! How this reptile came to be in the river remains unknown to this day.

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<sup>3</sup> In his interesting study, Plezia (1971) states that Kadłubek – who was the first to mention the legend of the dragon in association with Cracow – may well have known the story concerning Alexander the Great and his exploits as a dragon-slayer, especially since Kadłubek had studied in France and Italy where he could come across this tale, eventually weaving it into a localised Slavic foundation myth.



**Fig. 5.** Collection of “dragon bones” at the entrance to Wawel Cathedral (photograph by Robert Słaboński).

Although tales involving valiant knights and frightening dragons are naturally enticing, there is little consensus as to the definitive etymology and origin of the toponym Kraków. In addition to the Medieval tales that we have presented, it bears mentioning that certain historians have delved into the etymology of proto-Slavic terms and have suggested that the name of the mythic founder and of the city derives from other sources completely. As such, whereas the origin of Cracow and its name remain shrouded by uncertainty, we hope to have been able to clarify why the mythic dragon-slayer, who still figures so prominently in modern thinking, serves as an apt and emblematic figure of the Cracow Maya Conference.

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