

England and Poland: echoes of literary and cultural exchange before the Modern Age

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Abstract: This article explores the early cultural and literary connections between England and Poland from their earliest documented instances up to the end of the Middle Ages. While the geographical distance and linguistic barriers often limited direct contact, evidence suggests that sporadic yet meaningful exchanges did occur. Emphasis is placed on the literary dimension of these contacts, examining how selected Polish figures and places appeared in English chronicles, and vice versa. The article also discusses early intellectual encounters and the role of key individuals in fostering cultural transmission. These findings reveal that although England and Poland were not principal partners in medieval Europe, they engaged in a subtle yet significant cultural dialogue. The literary legacy of this interaction contributes to a deeper understanding of how national identities and intercultural perceptions were shaped during this formative period in European history.

Abstrakt: Artykuł podejmuje temat wczesnych związków kulturowych i literackich między Anglią a Polską – od najdawniejszych wzajemnych kontaktów aż do końca średniowiecza. Choć dystans geograficzny i bariery językowe ograniczały bezpośrednie kontakty, źródła wskazują na sporadyczne, lecz istotne formy wymiany między oboma krajami. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono wymiarowi literackiemu tych relacji – analizie obecności wybranych polskich postaci i miejsc w angielskich kronikach oraz odwrotnie. Omówiono także wczesne kontakty intelektualne oraz rolę kluczowych postaci w przekazie kulturowym. Wyniki badań ukazują, że choć Anglia i Polska nie były wówczas głównymi partnerami w Europie, prowadziły subtelny, lecz znaczący dialog kulturowy. Dziedzictwo literackie tej wymiany rzuca nowe światło na proces kształtowania się tożsamości narodowych i wzajemnych wyobrażeń w okresie średniowiecza.

Key words: Anglo-Polish relations, medieval cultural exchange, literary contacts, England and Poland

Slowa kluczowe: stosunki polsko-angielskie, średniowieczna wymiana kulturowa, kontakty literackie, Anglia i Polska

Introduction

Anglo-Polish cultural connections span well over a thousand years, with origins predating the formal establishment of both England and Poland as political entities.¹ From medieval poetry to royal correspondence, sporadic yet meaningful exchanges demonstrate a mutual awareness and curiosity. Despite geographical separation and linguistic differences, shared European institutions – such as monarchy, academia, and religion – enabled forms of cultural interaction. These early links laid the groundwork for more substantial connections in later centuries, revealing a rich yet often overlooked dimension of Anglo-Polish historical relations.

1. “Widsith”

It is noteworthy that the earliest known reference within the Anglo-Polish cultural tradition is literary in nature. The Old English poem “Widsith”, also known as “The traveller’s song”, is believed to have been composed as early as the 7th, or possibly even the 6th century. In this poem, the anonymous author recounts both fictional and historical events set in various regions, including territories that would later become part of Poland. Notably, the text includes the name *Wistla*, interpreted by some scholars as an early reference to the Vistula (Pol. *Wisła*), the principal river of modern-day Poland (Lipoński, 2000: 440; Lewicki, 1951: 488, 490).

However, this interpretation has been contested. Some researchers argue that identifying *Wistla* with the Vistula is methodologically unsound, with Anscombe (1915: 164) describing such a reading as “uncritical.”

A Polish translation of “Widsith” appears in volume one of *Monumenta Poloniae Historica* (Historical Monuments of Poland), edited by August Bielowski (1864: 5–10).

2. Ohthere and Wulfstan

The next established literary link comes from the pen of King Alfred the Great (r. 871–899). His *A description of Europe, and the voyages of Ohthere and Wulfstan, written in Anglo-Saxon* (1855) contains geographical accounts of Wulfstan – an Anglo-Saxon sailor who travelled among others in the Baltic area. Just like in “Widsith” from around three centuries before, the king’s book mentions the Vistula River, though this time it has the form of *Wisle* and *Visle* (as opposed to *Wistla* in the poem “Widsith”).

¹ Although this chapter at times also relates to Ireland and Scotland, due to the overwhelming majority of references to England (in accordance with the purpose of the work), the word “English” rather than “British” is used predominantly.

The lands of Slavs which will make future Poland are called *Weonodland* (the land of Wends) and the River Elbląg – *Ilfing*. King Alfred's description also contains a mention of the port of Truso (Bielowski, 1864:11–12), to which, as Wojciech Lipoński (2000: 440) explicates, the word *Drużno* alludes – the present-day Polish name of the lake in the vicinity of the port (see Laskowski, 2022). And in *Early Anglo-Polish relations* (1935: 105) Waclaw Borowy observes that, although the characterisation of Poland is laconic, it is nevertheless laudatory: “it is not deprived of geographical foundation and is of significance for the future relations of the two countries”.

3. Irish mission

The Polish historian, jurist, and ethnographer Alfons Parczewski argued that Irish Christian missionaries were present in Poland not only after the Baptism of Poland in 966 but also in earlier centuries, and likely in considerable numbers. In his work *Początki chrystianizmu w Polsce i misja irlandzka* (The Beginnings of Christianity in Poland and the Irish Mission) (1902: 236), Parczewski emphasises that although no direct records confirm their presence, the Irish – alongside other Christian nations – played an active role in preparing the ground for the spread of Christianity across Europe. He asserts that the territories that would become Poland could not have been an exception to this broader movement.

It is also plausible that Irish missionaries encountered English merchants in the region. According to Łukowska (2016: 32), English traders were already present in the 10th century, particularly near the estuary of the Vistula River, where they sought to establish commercial relations with the local population. This interaction may help explain the discovery of numerous English coins minted during that period found in Polish territory (Borowy, 1935: 107).

4. Canute the Great

The turn of the millennium saw the first-ever coming together of the Polish and Anglo-Danish royal milieus, as Canute the Great, the master of England and Denmark (r. 1016–1035), was indeed half-Polish. These ties constituted a literary inspiration for the German chronicler Thietmar ([1012–1018] 2002), among others, who plainly states that this powerful king was the nephew of the Polish King Bolesław Chrobry and the son of Świętosława – Mieszko I and Dobrawa's daughter – and Sweyn Forkbeard.²

² Canute the Great (date of birth unknown, reigned 1016–1035); Bolesław Chrobry (Eng. Boleslaus the Great, lived 967–1025, reigned as the first King of Poland in 1025); Świętosława (in Scandinavian sources known as Sigrid Storråda, Saum-Aesa, or Gunnhilda, dates of birth and death

Even if, aside from Thietmar's mentions, the abovementioned dynastic links did not produce any direct literary output *per se*, they did provide grounds for debate. For instance, while many scholars across different periods have supported the abovementioned genealogical claim, others remain sceptical. For instance, Rafał Prinke (2004: 81–83) argues that there is insufficient conclusive evidence to confirm Canute's Polish lineage. A range of scholarly positions on this matter, along with primary and secondary sources, is summarised in a detailed footnote in Borowy's *Early Anglo-Polish Relations* (1935: 106).

Furthermore, Canute's monographist Laurence Larson (1912: 32) assumes that Canute (also called Cnut or Knut) spent his early childhood in Poland. The boy, "who can at that time scarcely have been more than two or three years old, perhaps even younger", may have been brought to the Island of Wolin with the prospect of training him for warfare, a common practice at the time. Borowy (1935: 106) adds that "it may well be that the armoured bodyguard of Boleslas served as the model for Canute's famous troop, which enjoyed its own laws and received special pay".

Finally, in assessing Canute's character and cultural identity, Larson (1912: 262–263) observes that "the Slavic strain was evidently both broader and deeper than the Danish" (see also Laskowski, 2022).

5. After the Battle of Hastings

The next cultural and literary connection between Poland and England is rooted in the dynastic ties previously discussed. In 1069 – three years after the Battle of Hastings – the Danish King Sweyn Estrithson (r. 1047–1076), nephew of Canute the Great and a claimant to the English throne, launched an assault on Norman-ruled England (Brown, 2000: 119–120). According to the 12th-century English chronicle *Historiae ecclesiasticae* (The ecclesiastical history), the campaign was supported by allied forces from Poland, Frisia, and Saxony.

6. *Otia imperialia*

"The earliest known case of a learned discourse between an Englishman and a Pole is handed down to the reader by Gervase of Tilbury (c. 1150–1220), a Norman-English chronicler who flourished at the close of the 12th and the beginning of the 13th century", writes Borowy (1935: 107).

unknown); Mieszko I (lived c. 935–992, reigned as the duke of the Polans c. 962–992); Dobrawa (also Dąbrówka or Dubrawka), date of birth unknown, died in 977); Sweyn or Svein Forkbeard, also referred to as "Sven the Dane", (c. 960–1014).

There is a strong possibility that this erudite chronicler met in person his Polish counterpart and peer Wincenty Kadłubek (c. 1150–1223) during their stay at Bologna University and learnt from him some information about Poland. As in the previous cases of Polish elements alluded to by English writers, the Vistula River appears in Gervase's Latin work *Otia imperialia* (Recreation for an emperor). This source also provides the etymology of Poland as deriving from pole – a field or plain (Borowy, 1935: 107).

7. *Historia Anglorum*

References to Poland also appear in *Historia Anglorum*, a 13th-century English chronicle written by Matthew Paris (c. 1200–1259). The majority of these references concern the brutal Mongol invasion of Poland in 1241. In John Giles's 1889 English translation (p. 343), it is noted that Poland's rulers "have fallen victims to their exterminating pursuers, and afterwards the whole of that country has been devastated by them" (see also Laskowski, 2022).

Paris describes the Mongols – referred to as Tartars – in vividly hostile terms, portraying them as "inhuman and brutal, outlawed, barbarous, and untameable people [who] in their rash and cruel violence, visited the northern provinces of the Christians with dreadful devastation and destruction, and struck great fear and terror into all Christendom, [...] slaying or putting to flight princes, prelates, citizens, and rustics" (Giles, 1889: 338–339).

8. Kraków as a centre of cultural exchange

Peter Bajer in the book *Scots in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, 16th–18th centuries* (2012: 6) ascertains that, though sporadically, "Scots were migrating to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth even during the late fourteenth century." Furthermore, as Borowy (1937: 50–152) notes, 15th-century records from Kraków University make mention of two Scottish students, presumably Turner and Macaulay, and one from the Welsh town of Carmarthen.

Among the philosopher-theologians from the British Isles whose works were avidly studied in Kraków (Eng. Cracow) during the late medieval period, at least three eminent figures deserve particular mention. The first is the Scottish scholar John Duns (c. 1266–1308), widely known as Duns Scotus; the second is the English thinker William of Ockham (c. 1287–1347); and the third is John Wycliffe (c. 1320–1384), also from England.

Wycliffe's theological influence extended as far as Poland, where he was commemorated by the Polish cleric, scholar, and writer Jędrzej Gałka of Dobczyn (c. 1400–after 1451). In his work "Pieśń o Wiklifie" (A Song about Wycliffe), Gałka promoted the religious views of the English scholastic in a reformist spirit (Lorenc, 2018).

9. Mikołaj of Popielowo and Richard III of England

At the close of the Middle Ages, a certain Mikołaj of Popielowo (c. 1443–1490) journeyed to England, as noted by Jan Dąbrowski in *Polacy w Anglii i o Anglii* (Poles in England and about England) (1962: 16). Although this traveller, writer, and diplomat was German – known in that language as Niclas von Poplau – he came from Poland. In Albion, he was received by King Richard III (r. 1483–1485), which afforded him the opportunity to describe in his writings the customs observed at the English court.

His mission also included chronicling England's historical, geographical, and environmental features, as well as the habits of its people. Comparing the English to the Poles, he noticed that both peoples were similarly inclined towards lavish spending and theft, though Poles tended to spend more on food and comfort. He added that cunning was more characteristic of the English (see Krawczak, Laskowski, and Wróbel, 2019).

10. Royal letters

A notable example of literary and diplomatic exchange between England and Poland occurred in 1413, coinciding with Henry of Lancaster's accession to the English throne as King Henry V (r. 1413–1422), during a period of renewed intensity in the Anglo-French conflict. Serving as mediator between the English and French monarchs was Władysław II Jagiełło (also known as Jogaila, r. 1386–1434), the longest-reigning king of Poland.

In 1416, three years after Henry V's coronation, he and Jagiełło exchanged letters of courtesy affirming mutual respect and solidarity, referring to their relationship as a Polish-English brotherhood (Dąbrowski, 1962: 76). This royal correspondence is particularly significant given earlier hostilities: Henry V's father, the future King Henry IV, had allied with the Teutonic Order against Poland and Lithuania, personally leading 300 English archers into Lithuania in 1390 (Sokołowski, 1900: 27).

Nonetheless, the cordial relations established between Henry V and Jagiełło appear to have extended to their descendants. In 1450, Henry VI honoured Kazimierz IV Jagiellończyk – both of whom later became kings of England and Poland respectively – with the Order of the Garter, one of the most prestigious orders of knighthood in England (and later Britain) (Dąbrowski, 1962: 76).

11. Conclusion

The examination of Anglo-Polish cultural connections reveals a nuanced and multilayered relationship that stretches well before the political establishment of either nation. From the poetic allusions in "Widsith" to royal correspondences in

the late Middle Ages, these ties – though sporadic – highlight the presence of mutual awareness and intellectual curiosity. Literary and historical records provide a framework through which early perceptions and influences can be traced, even in the absence of sustained diplomatic or economic relations.

Despite geographical and linguistic barriers, the shared European context – particularly through religion, monarchy, and academia – enabled various channels of cultural exchange. This formative period set a precedent for more structured and substantial contacts in later centuries. The literary echoes, educational exchanges, and dynastic connections presented in this study serve as a testament to a deep-rooted yet often overlooked dimension of Anglo-Polish relations.

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