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SONG OF THE BISON

**TEXT AND TRANSLATION OF
NICOLAUS HUSSOVIANUS'S
"CARMEN DE STATURA, FERITATE
AC VENATIONE BISONTIS"**

**Edited and translated by
FREDERICK J. BOOTH**

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Great Hunt mosaic, Villa del Casale, Piazza Armerina, Sicily, Italy.

AUTHOR'S NOTE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

HOW DID I come to write a book on a Renaissance Latin epic poem about bison? For that, I must thank Marta Mestrovic Deyrup, librarian extraordinaire at Seton Hall University's Walsh Library. She brought to my attention the fact that there was a great body of Latin literature written in Eastern Europe during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, which, due to the volatile history of the region, most recently the Cold War, has largely been forgotten or ignored in the West.

After I started working on translating Hussovianus's bison poem, my wife and I went to Kraków to see a first edition of the poem and to get a taste of the city. There I met Dr. Janusz Gruchała of the Jagiellonian University, who showed us around the city and even took us to the salt mines. Janusz introduced me to his colleagues, including Dr. Andrzej Borowski, chairman of the Department of Old Polish Literature, who told me about important articles by Jerzy Axer, which explained the immediate political purpose of the poem. I would like to offer my special thanks to both of them. Sadly, Janusz did not live to see the publication of this book.

This book would never have been possible without the help of my reading group, which for the past twenty-five years has been enjoying Latin and Greek around my dining room table on Fridays. Ian and Jana McElroy, John Donovan, Will Denk, Bill Gallagher, and Hannah Lansky patiently worked through the Latin text and my translation and offered many helpful suggestions.

I would like to express my very great appreciation to Arc Humanities Press and its staff, and to Roy Rukkila, managing editor of the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, who was the matchmaker between Arc and me. The anonymous reviewers Roy arranged gave me a number of valuable ideas for improvements.

Seton Hall University, where I have taught for more than twenty years, has supported my work with two sabbaticals, during which I did a lot of the writing and rewriting. Additional support provided by Dean Peter Shoemaker of the College of Arts and Science was greatly appreciated.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the help provided by my wife, Ann Kiernan. She has read, reread, edited, and proofread this book. I could not have written it without her.

F. B.
New Brunswick, NJ



A “Wisent” or European bison in the Wisentgehege Springe game park near Hannover in Germany.
Photographer Michael Gäbler; reproduced under CC-BY 3.0 licence.

INTRODUCTION

IN 1521 NICOLAUS Hussovianus, an aide to Bishop Erazm Ciołek, Polish delegate to the Vatican during the papacy of Leo X, was watching the bullfights at a papal celebration in Rome. As Hussovianus tells it, the fury of the wounded animals reminded him of the bison hunts he had witnessed as a young man in the Polish–Lithuanian woods. His loose tongue earned him a writing assignment, for Bishop Ciołek asked him to write a poem about the bison hunts.

Pope Leo, who was an avid devotee of hunting, was fascinated by stories of the primeval Polish–Lithuanian forests and the fierce animals found in the northern woods, and he asked Bishop Ciołek to obtain a hide of the Lithuanian bison to be stuffed and put on display in Rome. Bishop Ciołek then wrote to Mikołaj Radziwiłł, palatine of Vilno (now Vilnius, Lithuania), asking for a bison hide, and commissioned Hussovianus to write a poem about the animal for the occasion. But Pope Leo, who was famously said to have remarked, on his election, “Let us enjoy the papacy since God has given it to us,”¹ did not live to enjoy his gift of a stuffed bison from Bishop Ciołek. In the next few months, before the plans could be carried out, the pope, the bishop, and the palatine all died.² Hussovianus returned to Poland in 1522 and put the finishing touches to his poem, which was published in Kraków in 1523. The poem was dedicated not to the late pope but to Poland’s Queen Bona, Hussovianus’s patroness after his return to Kraków, and it was prefaced by an epigram addressed to the queen’s secretary.

Hussovianus’s 1,072-line poem in elegiac couplets, *Carmen de statura, feritate ac venatione bisontis* (*A Poem about the Size, the Ferocity, and the Hunting of the Bison*),³ is a learned and exciting work that is both a natural history of the magnificent European bison and its habitat as well as an ethnography of the region’s rugged people. In addition, the poem touches on social and aesthetic issues and creates a powerful image of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.⁴ While the bison hunt takes place at the edges of the civilized world, Hussovianus’s polished and erudite Latin brings the Poles and Lithuanians into the context of European Christian culture.

1 Herbert Millingchamp Vaughan, *The Medici Popes (Leo X and Clement VII.)* (London: Methuen, 1908), 157.

2 Harold B. Segel, *Renaissance Culture in Poland: The Rise of Humanism, 1470–1543* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 140. On the same page, Segel calls Mikołaj Radziwiłł “the Black,” but this appears to be incorrect, since that Radziwiłł was only six years old in 1521 and had not yet acquired his colourful nickname. Norman Davies, *God’s Playground: A History of Poland*, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.168. The palatine in 1521 was his uncle, also Mikołaj Radziwiłł (1470–1522), who was known as *Amor Poloniae*, Friend of Poland. Tadeusz Nowakowski, *The Radziwills*, trans. Edward B. Garside (New York: Delacorte Press, 1974), 19.

3 Hereafter referred to as *Carmen de Bisonte*, abbreviated *CdB*.

4 Žanna Nekraševič-Karotkaja, “Latin Epic Poetry and Its Evolution as a Factor of Cultural Identity in Central and Eastern Europe in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century,” in *Latinitas in the Polish Crown and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania: Its Impact on the Development of Identities*, ed. Giovanna Siedina (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2014), 23.

The poem, which has been described as “a manifesto of northern humanism,”⁵ combines elements of epic and lyric poetry.⁶ Hussovianus employs the elegiac couplet, a traditionally lyric meter, but infuses it with strong epic and didactic elements. Although he eschews mythological ornamentation, Hussovianus’s poem contains many echoes of Classical authors, especially Virgil and Ovid. The style ranges from the informal to the epic, the mood from humility to pride, from veneration to venom.

Poland’s “golden age” lasted from the late fifteenth century through the death of King Sigismund Augustus in 1572. At that time Poland was one of the largest and most powerful kingdoms in Europe, made wealthy through sale of its enormous reserves of timber, grain, and salt. The spirit of Renaissance humanism was already well established in Poland when, in 1523, Erasmus wrote to a Kraków councilman: “I congratulate a people who, though formerly ill regarded as barbarian, now so blossoms in letters, laws, customs, religion, and in whatever else may spare it the reproach of uncouthness, that it can vie with the most distinguished and praised of nations.”⁷ Like intellectuals and academics throughout Europe during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Poles took on Latinized names and travelled to study in Italy and elsewhere throughout Europe. The Latin language enabled Slavic humanists to participate in the cultural, artistic, and scientific dialogues of their times.

Life of Hussovianus

Little is known of Hussovianus’s life other than what can be deduced from his poetry. Nicolaus Hussovianus is the Latinized form of Mikołaj z Hussowa or Mikołaj Hussowczyk, Nicholas of Hussów.⁸ He was born sometime between 1475 and 1485, died after 1533,⁹ and came from the Przemyśl region, in what is now southeastern Poland,¹⁰ an area of disputed jurisdiction that had been under the domination of Hungary and Kievan Rus. Hussovianus was acquainted with the customs and languages of Poland, Lithuania, and Belarus, all of which have claimed him as a native son.¹¹ *Carmen de bisonte* is of sufficient

5 Alina Nowicka-Jeżowa, “Adam and the Animals: From Hussovius to Brach-Czaina,” in *Birthday Beasts’ Book: Cultural Studies in Honour of Jerzy Axer*, ed. Katarzyna Marciniak (Warsaw: Artes Liberales, 2011), 246.

6 Nowicka-Jeżowa, “Adam and the Animals,” 248.

7 Letter 1393, quoted in Segel, *Renaissance Culture in Poland*, 265n13.

8 Segel, *Renaissance Culture in Poland*, 138.

9 Jan Pelczar, “Praefatio,” in Nicolaus Hussovianus, *Carmina*, ed. Jan Pelczar. Vol. IV of *Corpus Antiquissimorum Poetarum Poloniae Latinorum usque ad Ioannem Cochranovium* (Kraków: Sumptibus Academiae Litterarum Cracoviensis, 1894), xi.

10 Jerzy Axer, “Slavic Bison or European Beast? Thoughts on Nicolas Hussovianus’ *Song of the Bison*,” in *Nel mondo degli Slavi: Incontri e dialoghi tra culture: Studi in onore di Giovanna Brogi Bercoff*, ed. Maria Di Salvo, Giovanna Moracci, and Giovanna Siedini (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2008), 10.

11 For example, the official Internet portal of the president of the Republic of Belarus proudly declares: “Nicolaus Hussovianus wrote the first Latin-language poem about Belarus, *A Song about the Appearance, Savagery and Hunting of the Bison*.” See http://president.gov.by/pda/en/culture_en.

importance and interest that the 2003 Regular Session of the International School of Humanities at the University of Warsaw, led by Professor dr. hab. Jerzy Axer, was dedicated to this poem alone.¹²

Wherever he came from, Hussovianus declared himself a Pole, but, since the place names themselves have come to indicate geographic locations far different from their sixteenth-century antecedents, it is difficult to determine just what his declaration means, and the most recent scholarship is less concerned about the question of nationality.¹³

In nemus arctoum, quamvis scriptoribus impar
Romanis, certe hac arte, Polonus eo. (CdB 119–20)

Although I am no equal to the Roman writers, at least in this art, I enter into the northern woods, a Pole.

Hussovianus tells us that his father taught him how to stalk his quarry amid the natural dangers and the harsh climate of the Polish–Lithuanian forests:

Me pater instituit latebras lustrare ferarum
Suspensio et strepitus emoderante gradu;
Edocuit dubios illic cognoscere ventos,
Ne notet insidias nare vel aure fera;
Meque nives inter gelidas sudare coëgit
Impingens humeris grandia tela meis. (CdB 121–26)

My father taught me to walk among the lairs of wild beasts there, minimizing the sound by my careful step, and he taught me to read the changing winds, so the beasts would not smell or hear me setting the traps. My father forced me to toil amid the icy snow, placing the heavy gear on my shoulders.

Hussovianus, who was well educated in both Classical and Christian learning, came under the patronage of the eminent Bishop Erazm Ciołek (Erasmus Vitellius) (1474–1522), the Polish/Lithuanian¹⁴ ambassador to the Vatican, and was part of the bishop's staff during the bishop's last term in office. Ciołek, once a parish priest in Vilnius, had risen to prominence as bishop of Plock under Sigismund's older brother, King Alexander, who had named him envoy to Rome. Ciołek was a skilled diplomat and represented Poland at the courts of three popes: Alexander VI, Julius II, and then Leo X. The learned bishop's house in Rome served as a salon for humanists of various nationalities.¹⁵

Hussovianus's claim that he had read books written in the Cyrillic alphabet (CdB 73–76) suggests that Hussovianus had ties to the Vilnius court of King Alexander, who was married to Helena of Moscow, daughter of the tsar and grandniece of the last Byz-

¹² Nekraševič-Karotkaja, "Latin Epic Poetry," 23.

¹³ Andrzej Borowski, *Iter Polono-Belgo-Ollandicum: Cultural and Literary Relationships between the Commonwealth of Poland and the Netherlands in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2007), 8; Josef IJsewijn, *Companion to Neo-Latin Studies*, part 1: *History and Diffusion of Neo-Latin Literature*, 2nd ed. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990), 239.

¹⁴ Rasa Jurgelėnaitė, "The Impact of the Italian Poetic Tradition in Lithuania," in *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Bariensis: Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Neo-Latin Studies* (Bari 1994), ed. Rhoda Schnur (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1998), 350.

¹⁵ Segel, *Renaissance Culture in Poland*, 139.

antine emperor. Alexander had become grand duke of Lithuania in 1492, on the death of his father, and then, on the death of his older brother in 1501, king of Poland. Helena, who was never crowned queen because she refused to give up her Orthodox faith, supported Ciołek and other humanists, and Ciołek may have met Hussovianus in her court.¹⁶ The Vilnius connection was confirmed in 2018, when a graduate student working in the manuscript section of the Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences in Vilnius discovered a parchment deed written and sealed by Hussovianus in 1519 when he was serving as notary for Mikołaj Radziwiłł, the nobleman who was later asked to supply the bison hide for Pope Leo.¹⁷

In addition to Hussovianus's 1523 masterpiece on the bison, two other substantial poems and a collection of eleven shorter pieces survive. The *Carmina Minora*, eleven poems treating various topics in diverse meters, display many of the same concerns and values as the bison poem: Roman Catholic piety, a fierce sense of patriotism toward Poland and King Sigismund, loyalty to Bishop Ciołek, hatred of the political and religious divisions among Christians, abhorrence of blasphemous practices, and the idea of Poland as the last bulwark of Christianity. The first eight poems of the *Carmina Minora* were published in the same volume as the *Carmen de Bisonte* in 1523, and several of the people who figure in the *Song of the Bison* also appear in the shorter poems, including Bishop Erasmus Ciołek, Pope Adrian VI, and Ludovicus Aliphius. These poems, written in Rome, also provide a picture of the miserable conditions in the city during the plague of 1521–1523, which killed both Pope Leo X and Bishop Ciołek.

In Poem 2, entitled *In sacrificium nigri tauri Romae opera cuiusdam Graeculi contra vim pestis publice factum* (*On the Sacrifice of a Black Bull Performed in Public by the Service of a Certain Greek against the Power of a Plague*), Hussovianus tells us that the pestilence had compelled the nobles and high-ranking churchmen to abandon the city, leaving the common people to their fate. In desperation, and with the consent of the people and magistrates, a Spartan named Demetrius sacrificed a bull in the amphitheatre. Made docile by a spell whispered into its right ear, the animal was led through the city to be sacrificed in the manner of the ancients, as the foolish commoners looked on.¹⁸

Even the title indicates Hussovianus's disgust at the entire affair: The word *Graeculus* ("little Greek") carries pejorative connotation. The poet, who usually avoided allusions to pagan mythology in his work, was clearly appalled by the taurobolium in the holy city. The poem begins by warning a hypothetical stranger that the city, which is supposed to serve as an example to the entire world because of its saints, martyrs, and the very presence of God in the churches, has reverted to paganism.

¹⁶ Axer, "Slavic Bison or European Beast?," 10.

¹⁷ Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, "Mikalojaus Husoviano raštas surastas LMA Vrublevskių bibliotekoje" ["Nicholas Hussovianus's Writings Were Found at the Wroblewski Library"], June 28, 2018, www.mab.lt/lt/naujienos/1950; Karolis Čižauskas, "Didiko valdžia, humanistai ir raudonas vaškas: Mikalojaus Radvilos suteiktis žemioniui Jonui Slavskiui," *Istorijos Šaltinių Tyrimai* 6 (2018).

¹⁸ Hussovianus, *Carmina*, 100.

Four short rhetorical questions addressed to Rome make the point:

Tune timore levi modicae conterrita pestis
Per nigros tauros inferre monstra colis?
Quid responsa tibi cessant antiqua deorum?
Quin sequeris veterum devia sacra patrum?
Quin tua demoniis imples delubra nefandis,
Ut veteri cultu tura precesque feras? (CM 2 44–48)

Did you, terrified by the cowardly fear of a moderate plague, worship infernal monsters through black bulls? Why did the ancient responses of the gods fail you? Why rather do you follow the errant rites of the ancient fathers? Why do you fill your shrines with unspeakable demons, in order to carry the prayers and incense in the old cult?

Hussovianus addresses Poem 8 to his friend Carolus Antonius Moncinereus of Bologna, who had been Bishop Ciołek's secretary, asking him to give the *Song of the Bison* to Ludovicus Aliphius.¹⁹ Aliphius had come to Poland from Italy among Queen Bona's retinue of 287 Italians. He was the queen's secretary and a humanist lawyer and academic, who supervised the education of the heir apparent, Sigismund Augustus.

Hussovianus uses his bad health to appeal to Carolus Antonius:

Si mihi tu veteri desis fidoque sodali,
Quem gravitas morbi tam violentia premit,
Tot magnis cumulata malis; nam cuncta solutis
Membra labant nervis nilque vigoris habent. (CM 8 5–8)

If you fail me, an old and trusted friend, on whom so violent a power of sickness, accumulated from so many evils, presses, for all my limbs totter, their sinews loosened and their strength gone.

Hussovianus's request succeeded. Bona became the poet's sponsor and Hussovianus wrote a dedication to Aliphius that appears after the dedication to Bona at the beginning of the *Carmen de bisonte*.

Nova et miranda victoria de Turcis mense Iulio (*The Recent and Wonderful Victory over the Turks in the Month of July*), a poem of 87 elegiac couplets, was published in Kraków in 1524 to celebrate the Polish victory on July 2 over an alliance of Tartars, Turks, and Bulgars at Leopold (Lwów, Poland; now Lviv, Ukraine). These forces had invaded Lithuania and been pillaging through Poland, Russia, and Lithuania,²⁰ presenting precisely the sort of peril that the bison hunts had prepared the Poles to face.

Hussovianus praises the country, the king, the soldiers, the citizens, and—above all—God for the victory. It is likely that the poet heard about the battle first-hand from a veteran of the battle or from someone who had learned about it from a veteran. Hussovianus does not specify, writing only: "*Quae sunt dicta mihi sponte, secutus eram*" ("I had followed the report volunteered to me").²¹

¹⁹ While Hussovianus uses "Alphius", Pelczar notes that the name is spelled "Aliphius" by all other contemporaries. Hussovianus, *Carmina*, 8n1.

²⁰ Pelczar, "*Praefatio*," xxiv.

²¹ *De victoria* 172, in Hussovianus, *Carmina*, 55.

Once again, Hussovianus complains that he had been ill and was forced to write in haste, claiming that he had had only one day in which to compose his poem. We can only speculate about why he was in such a rush. There was not much time between the announcement of the victory and the festivities of public prayers and thanksgiving. The legate of Pope Clement VII (Adrian's successor and Leo X's nephew) happened to be staying in Kraków, and the attendance of a papal representative meant that the victory would be celebrated with the greatest pomp. Perhaps Hussovianus' patron Jan Karnkowski, to whom two of the *Carmina Minora* had been addressed, had suggested that Hussovianus compose the poem in time for the post-battle ceremonies in Kraków.²²

Hussovianus's hagiography, *De vita at gestis Divi Hyacinthi* (*Concerning the Life and Deeds of Saint Hyacinth*) (hereafter *De Divo*), was also published by the ailing poet in 1524. This work, 869 lines of dactylic hexameter that follow two dedications written in elegiac couplets and a prose introduction, is almost as long as the *Carmen de Bisonte*.

St. Hyacinth,²³ the patron saint of Lithuania, was an early Dominican friar and a missionary to Poland, Lithuania, Russia, and Scandinavia, who came to be known as the "Apostle of the North." He was born in Silesia, northwest of Kraków, ca. 1185 and died on August 15, 1257.²⁴ King Sigismund I petitioned Rome to have Hyacinth canonized, but only after continued efforts by his successors, King Stephen Bathory and King Sigismund III, did Pope Clement VIII make Hyacinth a saint, on April 17, 1594.²⁵

Between March 26, 1523, and September 6, 1524, the process leading to the canonization of Hyacinth was observed at the Dominican Church of the Holy Trinity in Kraków.²⁶ It was to commemorate this event that Hussovianus composed the biography of the holy man. Hagiographies written in Latin verse were replacing the earlier prose hagiographies in the Slavic lands, where poems celebrating the lives of saints of national importance were composed to coincide with the process of canonization.²⁷

As in the *Carmen de Bisonte*, Hussovianus portrays Poland as the bulwark of Christendom, while pagan rituals persist in Lithuania, despite the nation's conversion.

Non procul a nobis colubros venerantur et altis
 Arboribus libant homines, in flumina fruges
 Proiciunt numenque dei fluvialis adorant,
 Ludere quem per aquae contorta volumina cernunt,
 Et ne vana fides temereque exorta putetur,
 Volvitur et totis vox horrida murmurat undis;
 Arbitrioque dei fortunae commoda verti
 Feturaeque gregis credunt momenta teneri,
 Illius ut taceam deliria cetera gentis.

(De Divo 540–48)

²² Pelczar, "Praefatio," xxv–xxvi.

²³ Święty Jacek in Polish; San Jacinto in Spanish.

²⁴ Donald Attwater, *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 173.

²⁵ Dominican Order, "St. Hyacinth," *Dominikanie*, www.summitdominicans.org/blog/2006/08/st-hyacinth.

²⁶ Pelczar, "Praefatio," xxvii.

²⁷ Nekraševič-Karotkaja, "Latin Epic Poetry," 22, where the author identifies Hussovianus's poem as an example of this.

Not far away from us, men worship snakes, and make offerings to the tall trees, and they throw food into the rivers and worship the divinity of the river god, whom they discern playing through the rolling swells of the water, so that their faith is not thought empty or to have arisen rashly. A horrible voice rises and murmurs from all the waters, and they believe that, by the decision of the god, the conditions of fortune are changed, and the proper time for the reproduction of the flock is maintained: I will keep quiet about the other ravings of that nation.

Once again, as was the case with the poems on the bison and on the victory over the Turks, Hussovianus tells the reader that he has been sick and was pressed for time, and, as a result, his verses were not perfect. Whatever the nature of Hussovianus's illness was, the poet survived for another decade, to write *Carmina Minora* 9 and 10, both of which refer to events in 1533, and he died sometime after 1533, probably in Kraków.

Pope Leo X

The man for whom the bison and poem were intended, Pope Leo X (1475–1521), was the second son of Lorenzo the Magnificent. As a Medici, he had been educated by the best Italian humanists of his day, among them Poliziano, Ficino, and Mirandola,²⁸ and he surrounded himself with some of the most prominent intellectuals and artists of the time. Following his father's example, Leo donated generously to charity and spent lavishly on grand ceremonies and shows. A proud product of Italian Renaissance culture, Pope Leo loved theatre, art, music, and literature. Among the artists he supported was Raphael, whose famous portrait of Pope Leo and two of his nephews hangs in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. In addition to sponsoring the arts, Leo staged lavish spectacles that featured the exotic wildlife that was being imported into Europe during the Age of Discovery. The pope was particularly fond of his pet albino elephant Hanno, a gift from King Emmanuel of Portugal. When Hanno died, Raphael designed a memorial fresco, and Leo himself wrote the epitaph for the beast. King Emmanuel had also presented the pope with other lavish gifts, including rare animals and birds. In return, Portugal had received the Vatican's approval for its colonial ambitions in Asia, Africa, and the New World.²⁹ That Hussovianus, a Northerner, could attain such scholarly sophistication and find himself in the daunting intellectual circle of a Medici pope in sixteenth-century Rome is a testament to the mobility possible for educated men in the Latinate culture of Renaissance Europe.

Background to Hussovianus

During Hussovianus's lifetime (ca. 1480–1533) Poland and Lithuania were ruled as one nation under King Alexander (grand duke of Lithuania 1492–1506 and king of Poland 1501–1506) and then by his younger brother, Sigismund I (1467–1548; r. 1506–1548), the penultimate ruler of the Jagiellonian line of kings, whose founder had united the

²⁸ Vaughan, *The Medici Popes*, 7.

²⁹ Silvio A. Bedini, *The Pope's Elephant: An Elephant's Journey from Deep in India to the Heart of Rome* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1997).

two kingdoms. In 1386 the ten-year-old Princess Jadwiga of Poland had married Grand Duke Ladislaus Jagiełło of Lithuania, a man three times her age. The marriage effectively created the largest kingdom in Europe. Jagiełło's cousin was Vytautas, the grand duke of Lithuania (ca. 1350–1430; r. 1392–1430), who instituted the bison hunts that Hussovianus describes. (Hussovianus uses the Polish form of the name, referring to him as Witold.) By political and military manipulation, Vytautas obtained the title of grand duke of Lithuania, with the stipulation that the title would return to the Jagiełło family after Vytautas's death.³⁰

In accordance with the terms of the marriage, Jagiełło, along with his compatriots, converted to Christianity and freed all Poles held as prisoners or slaves in Lithuania. In several of his works, Hussovianus praises Witold and Sigismund not only for their martial capabilities but also for their piety: two features of an ideal ruler.

The young Queen Jadwiga devoted herself to a life of charity. Having been well educated in the arts and music, she took great interest in the University of Kraków, and when she died in 1399, at the age of twenty-four, she left her personal fortune to the university, which has been known ever since as the Jagiellonian University. Copernicus and St. Pope John Paul II are among its famous alumni, and the university, which to this day awards scholarships through its Queen Jadwiga Fund, published the Latin text of Hussovianus that I have used for this translation.

The Jagiellonian University would play a central role in the Polish Renaissance, providing the setting for the many political and intellectual discussions of the day. From all over Europe, students and lecturers arrived in Kraków to share their expertise in philosophy, theology, oratory, literature, mathematics, and the sciences. Poles participated in the cross-pollination of Renaissance Europe by going abroad to study, especially to Italy, where they absorbed the culture of Italian humanism and brought it home; but they also brought new ideas with them as they travelled in Western Europe.

Gregory of Sanok was a crucial figure in bringing the new learning to Poland. As a young man, Gregory left Kraków to study in Germany. When he returned, in 1428, he earned bachelor's and master's degrees from the Jagiellonian University and he gave lectures introducing Virgil's *Eclogues* to Poland.³¹ Gregory supported the causes of neoclassicism and humanism, which were often at odds with the scholasticism of the Church.

The study of the classics in Poland took a great leap forward in 1471, when Gregory, now an archbishop, offered asylum at his see in Kraków to the brilliant and colourful Italian renegade Filippo Buonaccorsi, whose flight from papal agents after a failed plot to assassinate Pope Paul II had led him first to Constantinople and then to Poland. Buonaccorsi had been a member of the Accademia Romana, a learned neo-pagan society notorious for its intemperate celebrations of pagan holidays.³² He had adopted the name Callimachus, after the remarkably innovative third-century BC Greek scholar/poet who

30 Linas Eriksonas, *National Heroes and National Identities: Scotland, Norway and Lithuania* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2004), 244.

31 Segel, *Renaissance Culture in Poland*, 20.

32 Czesław Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 17.

was attached to the court of the Ptolemies in Alexandria and devised the catalogue for the famous Great Library of Alexandria.

Buonaccorsi, who knew both Latin and Greek, soon became involved in Polish politics, serving as an advisor and secretary to Ladislaus's son King Casimir Jagiełło and as royal tutor. After the death of Paul II, Pope Sixtus IV, who was better disposed toward humanism than his predecessor, invited Buonaccorsi back to Rome, but he preferred to remain in Poland, where almost single-handedly he had introduced the advances of Italian humanism. He thrived in the learned company of Bishop Gregory's salon, and among the political and diplomatic intrigues of the court. Buonaccorsi also enjoyed the company of a woman whom he called Fannia in the Latin poems to her, which are Poland's first erotic literature.

In 1489 the German humanist Conrad Celtis arrived in Kraków.³³ Celtis is perhaps best known for rediscovering and publishing the Latin poetry and dramas of the tenth-century German nun Hrotswitha of Gandersheim.³⁴ Like Callimachus, Celtis was acquainted with the Accademia Romana, and he, too, wrote amorous poems celebrating his love affairs. Celtis and Buonaccorsi founded the Literary Society of the Vistula, which supported the classics and brought together another generation of Slavic intellectuals, who in turn would transmit the humanistic tradition and outlook to the greatest of the Polish Renaissance Latinists in the sixteenth century.³⁵

Under Casimir's rule, Poland had established itself as a strong political force amid the rival kingdoms of Central Europe, but Casimir's older sons, John Albert and Alexander, were unable to maintain the kingdom's territory or prestige. After the reigns of his two elder brothers, Sigismund ascended to the throne and managed to revive his country's fortunes. It was during the reign of this grandson of Jagiełło and Jadwiga that Renaissance humanism flourished in Poland. The royal courts were populated by poets, scientists, philosophers, architects, and artists, who brought Polish culture into its "golden age." Many of the poets were clerics, some of high rank, all Roman Catholic. Nicolaus Copernicus, otherwise known as Mikołaj Kopernyk, is undoubtedly the most famous Polish figure of the Renaissance, and his earthshaking book on the heliocentric Solar System is his country's most important contribution to it. Yet, long before his *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* was published in 1543, Copernicus had translated the letters of Theophylactos Simocattes, a seventh-century Byzantine writer, from Greek into Latin.³⁶ Like others of his generation, Copernicus, who attended the Jagiellonian University, wrote exclusively in Latin.

Although Poland's significant German population often leaned toward Protestantism, especially Lutheranism, the country remained Catholic even if the court was some-

33 Segel, *Renaissance Culture in Poland*, 83.

34 Hroswitha's *Opera*, edited by Celtis and published in Nuremberg in 1501, contained two woodcut illustrations by Albrecht Dürer. Christie's, "Lot 74 Hroswitha," November 14, 2007, www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/hroswitha-c935-c1002-opera-edited-by-conrad-celtes-4987700-details.aspx.

35 Segel, *Renaissance Culture in Poland*, 88–93.

36 Segel, *Renaissance Culture in Poland*, 127–28.

times at odds with the Vatican. During the Reformation Poland tolerated religious diversity and was free from persecutions, and during the 1560s Poland began to be referred to as the *asylum haereticorum*.³⁷

Of the poets at Sigismund I's court, the greatest were Dantiscus, Cricius, Ianicius, and Hussovianus, all humanists³⁸ who composed only in Latin. Jan Dantyszek (1485–1548), who took the name Ioannes Dantiscus, was not only a noted poet but also royal secretary and the leading diplomat in Sigismund's court. Dantiscus's political career brought him into contact with the greatest of his contemporaries, among them Erasmus, Martin Luther, Cortez, and his fellow Pole, Copernicus. On a visit to Henry VIII in England, Dantiscus met Cardinal Wolsey and Thomas More, who translated Dantiscus's conversation for the king; Henry's Latin was not up to the challenge.³⁹

Andreas Cricius (Andrejz Krzyzski) (1482–1537) composed epigrams to adorn the architectural projects sponsored by Sigismund I in his efforts to imbue medieval Krakow with the ambience of the Italian Renaissance. Cricius was among Polish envoys sent to Hungary to arrange the marriage of Sigismund to Barbara Zápolya, daughter of the palatine of Transylvania,⁴⁰ and Dantiscus, Cricius, and other poets competed to create poems to match the event. Three years after the wedding Queen Barbara died in childbirth, and Cricius's poetry reflects both his personal grief and that of the entire nation.

Cricius's secretary, Clemens Ianicius (Klemens Janicki) (1516–1543), was considered the best poet of his generation.⁴¹ Among his works is a poem written to celebrate the wedding of Sigismund Augustus to Elizabeth of Austria in 1543. The first half of the poem recounts the accomplishments of Sigismund I while the second anticipates the new regime's support of the arts and culture.

After the death of Queen Barbara, Sigismund married Bona Sforza of the noble Milanese family in 1518. Bona was a sophisticated and well-educated Italian, who encouraged the atmosphere of humanism at the court, and Hussovianus dedicated his book on the bison to her, asking her to bring his work to the attention of her husband, a man of action and affairs, who had little time for such reading. In his dedication to *Carmen de Bisonte*, Hussovianus employs the usual rhetorical techniques of the time,⁴² flattering the queen and asking that she support the arts in Poland in order to restore morale to the state.

The new queen arrived in Poland with a retinue of nearly 300 Italians, including architects, painters, poets, musicians, and cooks. She supported the theatre and poetry in Poland, and encouraged the development of the Polish cities, involving herself in the business of finance and national and international politics. Sigismund rebuilt much of

37 Gábor Almási, *The Uses of Humanism: Johannes Sambucus (1531–1584), Andreas Dudith (1533–1589), and the Republic of Letters in East Central Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 104n12.

38 Michael J. Mikoś, *Polish Renaissance Literature: An Anthology* (Columbus: Slavica, 1995), 35.

39 Segel, *Renaissance Culture in Poland*, 176–77; Davies, *God's Playground*, 284–85.

40 Segel, *Renaissance Culture in Poland*, 199, 204–5.

41 Milosz, *The History of Polish Literature*, 45–47.

42 Jacqueline Glomski, *Patronage and Humanistic Literature in the Age of the Jagiellons* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 62–63.