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## A Few Observations on Pope John Paul II's Relationship to the Ancient World

### ABSTRACT

The article points out a few selected threads of interest related to Karol Wojtyła's – Pope John Paul II's – relationship with the ancient world, with the focus on the Biblical lands. Some of his statements on this subject are discussed. Above all, the focus is on John Paul II's pilgrimages in 2000 and 2001. These two endeavors were connected with the Jubilee Year, in which the Pope visited, among other countries, Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Greece, referring to the ancient history of these locations.

**KEYWORDS:** Pope John Paul II, Karol Wojtyła, Ancient World, the Biblical World, Egypt, Holy Land, Greece, Pilgrimages

### STRESZCZENIE

Kilka uwag o odniesieniach papieża Jana Pawła II do świata starożytnego

Artykuł wskazuje kilka wybranych, interesujących wątków związanych z relacjami Karola Wojtyły – papieża Jana Pawła II ze światem starożytnym, zwłaszcza ziemią biblijną. Omówiono kilka jego wypowiedzi dotyczących tego tematu oraz – przede wszystkim – pielgrzymki, które odbył w roku 2000 i 2001. Miało to związek z Rokiem Jubileuszowym; papież odwiedził wówczas m.in. Egipt, Syrię, Jordanię i Grecję, nawiązując do antycznych dziejów tych miejsc.

**SŁOWA KLUCZE:** papież Jan Paweł II, Karol Wojtyła, świat starożytny, świat biblijny, Egipt, Ziemia Święta, Grecja, pielgrzymki

Once could hardly argue that Karol Wojtyła – from 1978 Pope John Paul II – was an expert in and lover of antiquity, or that he would speak many times about the heritage of the ancient world in contexts other than the religious one. However, several important exceptions should be

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emphasized. Classroom intellectual formation of the youth in the 1930s still included advanced learning of Latin and classical Greek along with reading classical literature. As a student, Wojtyła even received Greek extra lessons. Additionally, his secret studies during the years of World War II at the Seminary in Krakow enriched his knowledge with at least basic Hebrew (Szulc, 2007, p. 73) and biblical history, which to some extent overlapped with the history of the ancient Near East, ancient Greece, and Rome. This knowledge undoubtedly shapes and sensitizes every priest to the reception of this heritage. Let us also remember that contemporary Mediterranean archaeology, as a scientific discipline, emerged from previous biblical studies that tried to juxtapose the results of excavations, especially in Egypt, the Levant and Mesopotamia, with the historical message of the Old Testament. This relationship is still researched today (e.g. Kitchen, 2004; Keller, 2015; Price & House, 2017).

Another important factor were the youthful passions of Karol Wojtyła: literary history and theater. These two topics related in particular to the Polish poetry and drama of the 19th century, strongly saturated with Philhellenism. While living in Krakow, Wojtyła shaped his sensitivity within the tradition centered around the royal castle of Wawel, “the Polish Acropolis,” where he could see how the Polish playwright, poet, and painter Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907) attributed an aspect of Greek heroes to the heroes of the Polish national history, and where he fell under the spell of the Polish romantic poet, Cyprian Kamil Norwid (1821–1883), who saw a true realization of perfect humanity in a beautiful harmony between the heritage of antiquity and Christianity. In a letter addressed to his teacher, and later longtime friend, Mieczysław Kotlarczyk, Karol Wojtyła wrote: “I think about a Poland of Athens, but more perfect than Athens, with all the greatness of Christianity” (Kotlarczyk & Wojtyła, 2001, p. 304; a letter dated November 1939). As a priest progressing in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, he would spend more time in Rome, whose bishop he formally became as Pope John Paul II. For almost three decades of his pontificate, he lived and worked in direct physical and spiritual proximity to the tradition of the ancient metropolis, including the great ancient collections of the Vatican Museums. Also then, as head of the Catholic Church, he spoke approvingly and competently about the goals and needs of Christian archeology and research on Christian antiquity (Longosz, 2007; Figiel, 2007), and he supported the work of the papal institutions: Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra and Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana (Iwaszkiewicz-Wronikowska, 2007). In this article, we indicate some of the more interesting accents in the life and work of Karol Wojtyła – Pope John Paul II – focused on “archaeological and ancient studies.”

At the end of 1963, Wojtyła took a few days' pilgrimage to the Holy Land, just before the historic visit of Pope Paul VI (in January 1964). The intention of the Bishop of Krakow was a reflection on the identity and mission of the contemporary Church, which was the common heritage of "Rome and Jerusalem." Wojtyła, as he himself stressed, started his journey across the Middle East from Cairo, even though it was merely the result of logistics and air transport availability, as he only changed planes in the Egyptian capital. However, he noted the symbolism of that country in the context of the flight of the Holy Family (Matt. 2.13–15). Similarly, he only saw the Sinai peninsula from an airplane flying into Jerusalem ("in a way, it includes the entire mystery of the Exodus," he wrote). Unhurried, meditative visitations to evangelical locations in Israel, however, provided a deep experience for him (Wojtyła, 1963; Mason, 2016).

Already as Pope John Paul II, during his pilgrimage to Turkey, on 30 November 1979 (4th pilgrimage) he visited Ephesus (Ancient Greek: Ἔφεσος, Hittite: Apaša), the great ancient center of worship of the goddess Artemis, which is still evidenced today by the ruins of her magnificent temple (Artemision) regarded as one of the seven wonders of the world by the Greeks (Keller, 2015, pp. 398–405). Therefore, this is highly symbolic that Ephesus, the place of the missionary work of Paul the Apostle, holds the remains of the oldest church dedicated to Mary, and that the Council of Ephesus (431) confirmed the dogmatic title of Mary the Mother of God (Θεοτόκος).

Several years later, on 10–11 May 1997, the Pope visited Lebanon (77th pilgrimage), an area repeatedly mentioned in the Bible (1–2 Kings et al.), corresponding partially to the ancient Phenicia (Canaan, Arab.: Kanʿān). From the 7th century BC, Lebanon was subject to the changing domination (and cultural influence) of Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Egypt, and finally the Romans, as Provincia Syria (Keller, 2015, pp. 57–58). The main purpose of the pilgrimage was a solemn conclusion of the Synod of Bishops, with the participation of representatives of several Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church, and a Protestant church.

Pope John Paul II came into first-hand contact with the world of the ancient and biblical East during his millennium pilgrimages. The Pope especially emphasized that for many years he had wanted to celebrate the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ (AD Iubilaeum 2000), by visiting and praying in the places associated with "God's presence in history" (Oldakowski, 2005), following in the footsteps of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. He wanted to start his journey in the ancient city of Ur associated with the biblical patriarch Abraham (Keller, 2015, pp. 7–21). Unfortunately, the political situation in the region (near modern An Nāṣirīyah, on the western shore of the Euphrates) ruled out such a possibility. However,

as he pointed out during one of the audiences, he made a spiritual pilgrimage there.

It is worthy to refer to the Polish Jesuit Maximilian Rylło (1802–1848; Polgár, 1981, pp. 119–120), who reached the Euphrates and Tigris in April 1837 during his missionary journeys, and came to Nineveh (Naynawā), where he even conducted a sort of an archaeological reconnaissance. According to the Bible, Nineveh was saved by Jonah from the wrath of God (3 Jonah; Keller, 2015, pp. 31–32). After returning to Rome, Rylło provided Pope Gregory XVI with an interesting small collection of Mesopotamian artifacts (it was nearly a decade before the pioneering work of Austen H. Layard), in return for which he received the dignity of a member of the Pontifical Academy of Archeology (Janocha, 1999). Rylło was associated with an important episode in the life of Juliusz Słowacki (1809–1849) – Karol Wojtyła’s favorite poet; Słowacki met with the Jesuit in Jerusalem (1837), which he immortalized in one of his poems, so likely the Pope also knew about it.

John Paul II started a pilgrimage in the footsteps of Moses with his first papal visit in Egypt (90th pilgrimage). On February 24, 2000 he set foot on the land of Egypt, and his first words were: “as-salāmu ‘alaikum.” This travel, in addition to its Jubilee Year dimension, also had an obvious ecumenical nature, and represented a step forward in the dialog with Muslims. Undoubtedly, the biggest inspiration were the words of the Bible, “Out of Egypt I called my son” (Matt. 2.15), referring to the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt, where they sought refuge, and the same words spoken by God in the history of the Old Testament, when He brought the people of Israel out of Egypt (Exod. 20.2), to make the Covenant at the top of Sinai. Already during the greeting with the then president Ḥusnī Mubārak, the Pope stressed that Egypt started a five thousand years’ old civilization that is known worldwide for its monuments and the achievements of its science. He added that different cultures met and intermingled there, making Egypt famous for its wisdom and knowledge. In the days of early Christianity, the Egyptian city of Alexandria (Arab. al-‘Iskandariyya) where the Church was founded by a disciple of Peter and Paul, the Evangelist Mark, was the home of famous ecclesiastical writers, for example, Clement of Alexandria (Titus Flavius Clemens) and Origen, or great Fathers of the Church, such as Cyril of Alexandria and Athanasius. The Church of Alexandria in ancient times enjoyed great prestige as the second capital of Christianity after Rome and an important center of theological thought. Additionally, thanks to the saints Anthony of Egypt and Pachomius the Great, Egypt became the birthplace of monasticism. When in 451 AD the Council of Chalcedon denounced the heresy of Monophysitism, then widespread in Egypt, some of the faithful broke

communication with Rome, giving rise to the independent Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria. Let us also notice that the superior of the Coptic Church, Šinūda III, while expressing his thanks to John Paul II for the visit, stressed the role of Egypt in the history of salvation, and pointed to the spiritual roots of the ties between the Church of Rome and the Egyptian Church. As Holy Mass was celebrated in Cairo, liturgical chants were performed, among others, in the Coptic language, which is philologically the last phase of the language of the ancient Egyptians. The climax of the Pope's stay in Egypt was the pilgrimage of February 26 to Saint Catherine's Monastery on the Sinai (Sīnā), erected in the sixth century by Emperor Justinian the Great in a place where, according to tradition, God appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Keller, 2015, pp. 130–138). Archbishop Damian personally showed the location of the biblical sites, and especially “the well of Jethro” (Exod. 18), “the roots of the burning bush” (Exod. 3.3–4; Mark 12.26; Luke 20.37; Acts 7.30–34), the relics of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, and a collection of biblical manuscripts (including the famous *Codex Sinaiticus*).

A month later (20–26 March 2000), John Paul II went on another, 91st apostolic journey, to Jordan and Israel. Ancient history of the present territory of the Kingdom of Jordan was stormy, but typical for this region. The first Semitic tribes (‘Ammôn, Moab, Edom; cf. Keller, 2015, pp. 149–155) in the tenth century BC were conquered by the kingdom of Israel, and two centuries later, by the Assyrian Empire. Soon, however, the region was dominated by the Babylonians and then (after 539 BC), by the Persians. In the southern part of modern Jordan and Syria, the Nabataean Kingdom began to take shape (Gen. 25.13; Isa. 60.7), fed by the population influx migrating north the Arabian Peninsula, initially dependent on the Persians, the Ptolemaic Egypt and for a short period, also on Palmyra. After the Roman annexation of the Nabataean Kingdom with its capital in Petra (Raqmu; Arab.: al-Batrā’) and Sinai, Provincia Arabia Petraea was established there in 106 AD. The destination of the Pope's pilgrimage was the shrine of Moses on Mount Nebo (Jabal Nibu; Keller, 2015, p. 154), from where the prophet and leader of the Israelites watched the Promised Land after the forty-year journey through the desert (Deut. 32.49), and he may have been buried in the area (Deut. 34.5–6). The history of human settlements on Mount Nebo dates back to the Bronze Age (Piccirillo & Alliata, 1998) and the hypothesis of its biblical identification was put forward in 1881 by the members of the American Palestine Exploration Society. The Pope visited the archaeological site, first excavated by the Franciscan Sylvester Saller in 1933, and from 1935 explored along with Bellarmino Bagatti. In 1963, Virgilio Corbo directed the reconstruction of the ruins, and since 1976, the studies had been headed by Fr. Michele Piccirillo from the

Jerusalem Studium Biblicum Franciscanum. Currently, the Franciscan Archaeological Institute maintains a base at Mount Nebo. The next day, John Paul II went to the valley of Wādī Kharrār, where, according to tradition, St. John was giving baptisms in the waters of the Jordan River (Arab.: Wādī Nahr al-Urdunn; Waheeb, 2001; Keller, 2015, pp. 54–57, 375–379).

In the afternoon, immediately after arriving from Jordan to Israel, the Pope first went to Bethlehem, and the next day he visited the Cenacle in Jerusalem. He met with the chief Rabbis of Israel, the Ashkenazi one (Western rite), Jisra'el Me'ir Lau and the Sephardim (Eastern rite) one, Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron. An interesting, “archeological” accent of this stage of the pilgrimage was marked by the Pope’s visit (on March 24) to Chorazin (modern Kerazeh); an ancient village near the Sea of Galilee (Lake Tiberias, Hebrew: Yam Kinneret) where, according to the information provided by the evangelists Matthew and Luke, Jesus taught and performed miracles (Matt. 11.20–24; Luke 10.13–15). Currently, the area is within the National Archaeological Park with some ruins, among which an impressive, ancient synagogue comprised of black basalt stands out particularly. According to tradition, it is a synagogue from the time of Christ, even though most of the ruins are rather dated back only to the fourth century AD, as shown by studies conducted there in years 1962–1964 and 1980–1987 (Yeivin, 2000). Earlier, in 1926, archaeologists discovered a decorative basalt object, reminiscent of a seat, and having associated it with a passage from the Gospel of Matthew (Matt. 23.2), they called it the “Seat of Moses.” On the last day of his pilgrimage in Jerusalem, the Pope visited the famous monumental piece of wall (Hebrew: ha-kotel ha-ma'arawi) surrounding the west side of the location where the Jewish Second Temple (516 BC–70 AD) once stood, which replaced Solomon’s Temple (the First Temple) and the only remnant of it still existing today (Mark 13.1–2; Matt. 24.1–3; Luke 21.5–6). This piece of the wall is known as the “Western Wall” or the “Wailing Wall” (Ritmeyer, 2006; Keller, 2015, p. 415).

Between 4 and 9 May 2001, John Paul II made his 93rd pilgrimage, the destination of which was Greece, Syria and Malta, so strongly reminiscent of the trail of missionary journeys made by Paul the Apostle. The first two days in Athens were, as he called it, a symbolic settling of a debt to two great, invaluable traditions crossing their paths on the land of Hellas – the heritage of the Antiquity, which our civilization is derived from, and the Greek Christianity, which undertook a dialog forming the shape of modern Europe and large parts of the world. The power of Greek thought met there with the power of faith. In Plato’s thought and message of *παιδεία* (*paidéia*), a familiar search for goodness, truth and beauty was found. John Paul II pointed out the timelessness of the message of the Ancient Greek (Delphic) aphorism of “Know thyself” (*γνώθι σεαυτόν*) inclining toward

the deepest humanistic reflection. He also recalled that Christianity, which admittedly came from Palestine, spread around the ancient and medieval world carried both in Greek and Latin languages. The Pope stressed how important it was for him to arrive at the hill of the Areopagus (ὁ Ἄρειος πᾶγος), near the Acropolis, where Paul the Apostle delivered his historic speech (Acts 17.16–34).

The visit to Syria (May 5–8), despite the huge ancient heritage of these lands which are the link between Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Holy Land (Keller, 2015, pp. 41–53 passim) did not involve any distinct “archaeological” accents. The most important event, not only of this papal pilgrimage, but also in the whole history of the papacy, was the visit to the Great Mosque of Damascus (Arab.: Jāmi’ Banī Umayyah al-Kabīr). In this mosque, relics of John the Baptist, considered to be one of the prophets of Islam as well, are kept. In Damascus (Arab.: Dimašq), which is one of the oldest cities of the ancient East (already mentioned in ancient Egyptian sources as T(j)mśkw), a powerful temple of Jupiter was transformed (Keller, 2015, p. 54) into a Cathedral of John the Baptist, later partly demolished and retransformed as the great mosque. It was there that John Paul II – as the first pope – stepped over the threshold of a Muslim temple. The Millennium papal pilgrimage in the footsteps of the biblical antiquity ended in Malta (May 8–9), where Paul the Apostle arrived from Caesarea (now in north-central Israel) while heading towards Rome (as a result of shipwreck; Acts 27, 28.1–10) and where he spent three months in 60 AD.

At the end of the above reconnaissance it is also worth mentioning that Pope Francis went to the Holy Land during his second apostolic journey (24–26 May 2014) and during his 18th pilgrimage (28–29 April 2017) he visited Egypt, where he was invited by the President ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ as-Sīsī, the Egyptian Catholic bishops, and the Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, Theodoros [Tawadros] II.

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