

THE LEGEND OF THE FOURTEEN  
FRANCISCAN MARTYRS IN VILNIUS:  
A QUESTION OF MEANING

*Summary*

The purpose of this article is to get under the skin of the legend in order to disclose its message in terms of its origin and possible implications. This legend first appeared in the Bychowiec chronicle (c. 1530s). Despite the fact that this legend belongs to the earliest original data contained in this chronicle, scholars have paid so far only a rather cursory attention to it, in no comparison with the well-known legend of the origins of the Lithuanian nobility from the Romans. Some problems have also been caused by a hypercritical approach, characteristic of the scholarly climate in the twentieth century, which denied any historical validity of this legend. Meanwhile, a more recent research (notably, by Stephen C. Rowell) has demonstrated that there are nearly contemporary sources from the end of the fourteenth century that inform us about the Franciscan martyrs in Vilnius under the grand duke Algirdas of Lithuania (1345-1377). This is exactly the topic that is central in the legend of the fourteen Franciscan martyrs. No denying, of course, that this legend is replete with non-historical details and fictive elements, we have tried to uncover its meaning by suggesting some possible models for it from the Acts of the Apostles. This seems to be a proper way for looking for authoritative text which could provide the legend with credibility in the eyes of contemporaries, for the main message of the legend is the very origins of the Catholic faith in Lithuania's capital city Vilnius. Further implications may be gleaned not only from the fact (fictive) that the Lithuanian magnate Petras Goštautas (Pol. Piotr Gasztołd) was the main inspirator for the Franciscan mission to Lithuania, thus, in a sense, outplaying the Polish king Władysław Jogaila, but also from a totally incorrect suggestion (found further on the pages of the Bychowiec chronicle) that the first bishop of Vilnius came from the Franciscan convent in Vilnius that was set up in the wake of the martyrdom. Such false information makes the Bychowiec chronicle stand apart from all other Lithuanian chronicles. In short, the story of the origins of the Catholic faith in Lithuania as it is presented in the Bychowiec chronicle attempts at diminishing the role of the Polish mediation in the Lithuanian conversion and thus to provide grounds for setting up, eventually, an ecclesiastical province. So far-fetched scheme should be compared with the attempts on the part of Lithuanian magnates to make Sigismundus Augustus king of Lithuania, a suggestion that was confided in to his father Sigismundus the Old in 1526. Taking into account the ability of the medieval chroniclers to write "history of the future" by putting contemporary or future aspirations deep in the past, this legend sheds some light on what was the ultimate purpose of some Lithuanian magnates.

As is well known medieval Lithuania did not become kingdom, nor did the diocese of Vilnius receive the status of archbishopric (up to the twentieth century). Whatever the original motives for the appearance of the legend it continued to live on its own for centuries. This must be due not only to the “perennial” theme of the origins of the Catholic faith in Lithuania, but also to a rather rich field of possible associations with some Scriptural episodes and the cults of the other saints. This legend has been taken for granted for centuries and was able even to exercise its impact on the sacred topography of Vilnius, as is seen to this day in the case of the Three Crosses that dominate over the Old Town.