

Body, Place, and Knowledge: The *Plica polonica* in Travelogues and Experts' Reflections around 1800

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Abstract: The matting of hair, understood as a medical condition since around 1600 and named *Plica polonica*, appears prominently in the writings of eighteenth-century authors travelling to Polish lands or in experts' opinions about these provinces. This paper argues that integrating observations about an allegedly endemic medical condition was intimately linked to the emerging discourse on eastern Europe as an essentially different part of the continent, and an object of colonising efforts. It demonstrates that travelogues and experts' opinions were drawing inspiration, observations, and assumptions from each other, a hitherto only partially understood instance of cross-fertilising writing on eastern Europe, offering important insights into the development of experts' culture in the Age of Enlightenment.

Keywords: Poland-Lithuania; *Plica polonica*; Enlightenment; Travel writing; History of medicine, history of the body, history of knowledge, history of science; Jewish history

Beyond the political and societal reconfigurations which the partitions of Poland brought about, the late eighteenth century appears as a particularly dynamic period in the emergence of discourses about the essential otherness of eastern Europe. Among

the more surprising items which Larry Wolff refers to in his pathbreaking study *Inventing Eastern Europe* is the frequent recurrence of the *Plica polonica* in Western writings of this period.¹ This medical term identified the visible and often extensive matting of human and animal hair, known in popular parlance as *Weichselzopf* in German and as *koltun* in Polish.² The object of intense speculation among early modern medical theoreticians and practitioners, the matting of hair has since the second half of the 19th century been recognized as not constituting a medical condition, but rather the consequence of poor hygiene.³ While Wolff was correct to point to the striking frequency of references to *Plica* in late eighteenth-century writings in a variety of genres, he does not speculate further about the reasons for this prominence. This present chapter proposes to understand the readiness of

1 Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 7.

2 For the significance of matted hair in early modern Jewish discourses concerning the delineation between human and preternatural worlds, see François Guesnet, 'Demonic Entanglements: Contextualisations of Matted Hair in Medieval and Early Modern Western and Eastern Ashkenaz', in *Monsters and Monstrosity in Jewish History. From the Middle Ages to Modernity*, ed. Iris Idelson-Shein and Christian Wiese (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2018), 86-101. For an excellent discussion of the enlightened discourse around *Plica polonica* as marking the transition from a religious worldview to understanding the phenomenon as an anomaly, with a focus on the case of Lithuania, see Vaiva Kalumaitė-Kubeckienė, 'The Phenomenon of Plica Polonica in Lithuania: A Clash of Religious and Scientific Mentalities', *Acta Baltica Historiae et Philosophiae Scientiarum* 1, no. 2 (2013): 53-66.

³ While the number of publications expressing doubt about the definition of the matting of hair as a medical condition rose from the late 18th century, debates continued well into the 19th century. Immanuel Hamburger, *Über die Irrlehre der Plica Polonica* (Berlin: A.Hirschwald, 1861), marks a watershed in academic medical literature, with a forceful rejection of an assumption of matted hair as a condition.

contemporary authors to refer to and reflect about this phenomenon as an important ingredient in the othering of eastern Europe in general, and Poland more specifically. They often identified Jews as victims or carriers of this alleged condition, based both on speculation, the repetition of received wisdoms, as well as the observation of cases of matted hair among Jews encountered while travelling in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and its successor states.⁴ In a period of profound political and administrative transformation triggered by the downfall and destruction of this commonwealth, questions of the essence and nature of its inhabitants obviously gained in relevance.

To discuss a physical and medical peculiarity of the monstrous type (a *Merckwürdigkeit*, as one of the authors discussed below would call it) lent itself particularly well to the task. As the matting of hair had been well established in medical scholarship since the seventeenth century, and identified as an endemic condition in and of Poland, it offered a suitable cognitive trajectory to grasp the characteristics of a region which became the object of imperial reconfiguration and colonisation. This holds true especially for authors of travelogues and for experts active in fields of relevance for this endeavour: geographers, historians, medical professionals, and administrators. The ramifications of these considerations have thus far been only partially understood. The chapter contends that travelogues in dialogue with experts' views reinforced existing prejudice at a crucial juncture, and contributed to deepening regional differences within Europe through the perceived relationship between the *Plica* and physical, behavioural and social differences. Reflecting on the *Plica* offered the opportunity to develop and demonstrate 'specialized practical and productive knowledge not readily available to everyone' and 'of keen interest to the

⁴ Guesnet, 'Demonic Entanglements', 95-97.

state.⁵ This expertise constituted significant intelligence on less well-known region of Europe that was home to a condition which was assumed to be both contagious and monstrous. Describing and defining this peculiar condition of the *Plica* contributed to the othering of the inhabitants of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and provided a justification for the introduction of public health measures and ultimately increased policing.

Travellers, Experts, and the Matting of Hair

Travelogues are not reliable reflections of how things were at a given point in time. The reality allegedly encountered by the author of a travelogue certainly impacted on his or her account. But exaggerations, inventions, the hope to impress with descriptions of out-of-the ordinary phenomena as well as the confirmation or rejection of prejudices of an assumed audience about the places visited provide an inherent bias to the genre which is impossible to disentangle from 'objective' descriptions. As a genre, therefore, they need to be analysed 'not as sources of information about the described countries, but rather as testimonies of ways of thinking of their authors, and the mentality of the place of origin.'⁶ François Hartog proposed the term 'imaginary

5 Eric Ash, 'Introduction: Expertise and the Early Modern State', *Osiris. A Research Journal Devoted to the History of Science and Its Cultural Influences* 25 (2010): 1-24, here 4-5.

6 Michael Harbsmeier, 'Reisebeschreibungen als mentalitätsgeschichtliche Quellen: Überlegungen zu einer historisch-anthropologischen Untersuchung frühneuzeitlicher deutscher Reisebeschreibungen', in Antoni Mączak (ed.), *Reiseberichte als Quellen*

ethnography' for this framework of thinking and writing about visiting foreign places.⁷ The 'other' described in the travelogue becomes the contrasting foil against which the self is construed and asserted.⁸

This is not to say that travelogues did not convey concrete and relevant information. In the early modern period, when commercial and diplomatic relations intensified and reports about travels to central Europe begin to emerge in greater numbers, their purpose was clearly to explain the political, administrative, geographic, and economic characteristics of this region. Thus, the first British travel account of central Europe by George Carew focused on the most important urban settlements and power relations in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, its religious communities and minorities, the great freedoms of the nobility, and that country's diplomatic relations with its neighbours.⁹ Such accounts were, however, not only invariably narrow but also, at least initially, rare. Especially in the early modern period,

europäischer Kulturgeschichte. Aufgaben und Möglichkeiten der historischen Reiseforschung, (Wolfenbüttel: Herzog August Bibliothek, 1982), 1-32.

7 François Hartog, *Le miroir d'Hérodote. Essai sur la représentation de l'autre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 5.

8 *Ibid.*, 13.

9 George Carew, *Relation of the State of Polonia and the United Provinces of that Crown Anno 1598, Elementa ad fontium editiones XIII*, vol. 1, Charles H. Talbot (ed.), *Res Polonicae ex Archivo Musei Britannici*, (Rome: 1965). A similar type of published diplomatic report is the travelogue by the French diplomat François Paulin Dalerac, published under pseudonym around a hundred years later: *Memoires du Chevalier de Beaujeu, Contenant ses divers voyages, tant en Pologne, en Allemagne, qu'en Hongrie, avec des relations particulières des Affaires de ces Pays-là, depuis l'année MDCLXXXIX* (Amsterdam 1700).

travelogues by eastern European authors travelling to the west or the south of Europe actually outnumbered those coming to the region.¹⁰

Justin Stagl contends that early modern travelogue-reports have significantly contributed to the emergence of statistics as one discipline of governance studies, resonating with Eric Ash's definition of the emergence of the early modern expert referred to earlier.¹¹ More importantly, apodemic literature as a genre developed a standard of what to include when writing an account of travelling to foreign shores, and also, about how to travel. Exhortations to write in a truthful manner and the rejection of including hearsay and rumours as sources of such reports were a central topos in apodemic writing.¹² With the growing popularity of travelogues, how-to guides emerged as a meta-genre, the *ars apodemica*, which included detailed tables of

10 For a comprehensive reflection on travel writing by eastern Europeans, see Wendy Bracewell (ed.), *Orientalisms. An Anthology of East European Travel Writing, ca. 1550-2000*, vol. 1, Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2009); Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis, (eds), *Under Eastern Eyes. A Comparative Introduction to East European Travel Writing on Europe*, vol. 2, Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2008); and eadem, (eds), *A Bibliography of East European Travel Writing on Europe*, vol. 3, Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2008).

11 Justin Stagl, 'Der wohl unterwiesene Passagier. Reisekunst und Gesellschaftsbeschreibung vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert', in B.I. Krasnobaev, Gert Robel, and Herbert Zeman (eds), *Reisen und Reisebeschreibungen im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert als Quellen der Kulturbeziehungsforchung*, (Berlin: Camen, 1980), 353-84, specifically 354. See also idem, 'Ars Apodemica: Bildungsreise und Reisetmethodik von 1560 bis 1600', in Xenja von Ertzdorff and Dieter Neukirch (eds), *Reisen und Reiseliteratur im Mittelalter und in der Frühen Neuzeit*, (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1992), 141-89, and Ash, 'Introduction', 1-24.

12 Stagl, 'Der wohl unterwiesene Passagier', 362.

matters to investigate and questions to answer. One of the last known guides of this type, the *Patriotic Traveller* published in London in 1789, recommended to subsume one's observations during travelling in a diary answering two thousand four hundred forty three questions in thirty seven sections. Stagl contends that "early modern apodemic crumbled under its own weight."¹³

But from the ruins arose new types of and perspectives in travel writing. In 1741, Carl von Linné had already suggested that the *peregrinatio in patriam*, the exploration of unknown places in one's own country of residence, could contribute to furthering human knowledge and understanding on the basis of precise observation. Also, while until the eighteenth century, European, non-commercial travelling – be it in the form of the *grand tour*¹⁴ or on diplomatic missions – and the leisure to write and publish about it had been the almost exclusive preserve of aristocrats and missionaries, the growing number of non-aristocratic experts in the higher echelons of state administration contributed to a broadening of the cohort of potential authors.¹⁵ These less affluent travellers reflected and wrote on more mundane aspects of travelling such as means of transportation, distances, food prices, and accommodation, frequently influenced by their ambition to be of use to state administrators. One of the most eminent

Kommentiert [MOU1]: I am not sure why the following paragraph is indented.

13 Ibid., 368.

14 For a broad reflection of recent research into this pattern of aristocratic educational traveling see Hans-Jürgen Bömelburg, 'Adelige Mobilität und Grand Tour im polnischen und litauischen Adel' in Rainer Babel and Werner Paravicini (eds), *Grand Tour. Adeliges Reisen und europäische Kultur vom 14. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert. Akten der internationalen Kolloquien in der Villa Vigoni 1999 und im Deutschen Historischen Institut Paris 2000* (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke, 2005), 309-26.

15 The description of Polish geological formations by a German advisor to the Polish court might serve as an example for both of these developments: Johann Philipp von Carosi, *Reisen durch verschiedene polnische Provinzen, mineralischen und anderen Inhalts. Erster Teil* (Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1781).

experts on eighteenth century central and eastern Europe and frequent traveller to Russia, August Ludwig Schlözer, would offer courses at the University of Göttingen that consisted of a ‘weekly travel *collegium* of two to three hours at six o'clock in the evening for those who wish to travel in the future’ and addressed practical questions such as the dangers of travelling by ship, including storms, sea-sickness, and overcrowded cabins.¹⁶

Two further factors triggered an increase in travel and travel writing about Poland-Lithuania in the second half of the eighteenth century: the accession to the throne of the enlightened monarch Stanisław August Poniatowski (1764-1795), whose reformist programme attracted significant international attention, (as well as the assistance of a number of foreigners), which was bolstered by the partitions of the commonwealth in 1772, 1793, and 1795. The obvious need to gather intelligence about the newly acquired provinces and the wish to offer expertise about the circumstances of these provinces, their population and their prospects are a frequently recurrent motive of visitors. The account of a journey from Kurland to Warsaw in 1791 by Johann Christoph Friedrich Schulz, a professor of history in Mitau, is a good example of a travelogue to be read by the new Russian administration.¹⁷ Schulz, a

16 August Ludwig Schlözer, *Vorlesungen über Land- und Seereisen. Nach dem Kollegheft des stud. Jur. E.F. Haupt (Wintersemester 1795/96)*, ed. Wilhelm Ebel (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1964).

17 Johann Christoph Friedrich Schulz, *Reise nach Warschau. Eine Schilderung aus den Jahren 1791-1793*. First published as *Reise eines Liefländers von Riga nach Warschau, durch Südpreußen, über Breslau, Dresden, Karlsbad, Bayreuth ... nach Botzen in Tyrol* (Berlin: Vieweg der Ältere, 1795), republished in 1895 and again in 1941, during the Nazi regime, as an exemplary description of dispersed Germanic culture in eastern central Europe (‘Streudeutschtum’).

delegate of the burghers of Mitau to the Four Year Sejm in 1791, wrote his account after the second partition of Poland-Lithuania.

It is in this context of enlightened description and reflection that the requirements of good governance, including matters of health and illness, of bodily hygiene and medical circumstances gained new relevance. It is also in this context that a condition commonly associated with central and eastern Europe, the *Plica polonica*, gained considerable prominence in travelogues.¹⁸ This term and the definition of matted hair as a medical condition go back to a long theoretical treatise by Ercole Sassonia, a prolific author and head of the then leading Medical Faculty at the University of Padua, about the dangers emanating from this phenomenon, consisting of pain in the extremities, loss of control of movement, and fever endangering the lives of those afflicted.¹⁹ Inspired by a letter sent by the head of the newly founded Academy in Zamość, Wawrzyniec Starnigel, in 1599, Sassonia's treatise was a purely theoretical assessment of the information provided by Starnigel.

18 Bernhard Struck, *Nicht West - nicht Ost. Frankreich und Polen in der Wahrnehmung deutscher Reisender zwischen 1750 und 1850* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006), 394. 'Time and again, travellers would refer to the Weichselzopf, as a typically Polish condition,' the author claims, however offering Johann Joseph Kausch (see below) as the only reference. The outstanding edition of travel accounts on eighteenth-century Poland, Waclaw Zawadzki, *Polska stanislawska w oczach cudzoziemców*, 2 vols., (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1963) also asserts that 'almost all foreigners from the 16th to the 18th c. discuss the *koltun* (Pol. matted hair) in their observations', *ibid.*, vol. 1, 862.

19 Guesnet, 'Demonic Entanglements', 86-101.

Sassonia came to the fateful conclusion that this matting of hair was a dangerous, endemic condition pertaining to Poland, and proposed the new taxonomy.²⁰

Henceforth, numerous academic authors developed theories about the possible causation, the impact and potential treatments of this threatening ailment.²¹ A long article about the *Plica polonica* appeared in the first edition of Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, and significantly contributed to raising the awareness of the educated public to this alleged condition. Its author, Jean-Joseph Menuret de Chambaud (1739-1815), was among the leading medical experts of this project.²² He emphasised the condition's endemic character in Poland:

'This condition is, as we have already stated, very common and endemic in Poland. According to the local historians, it affected the kingdom from those provinces adjacent to Russia, from whence it spread to this empire, in Prussia,

20 Ercole Sassonia, *De plica quam Poloni Gwoździec, Roxolani Koltunum vocant* (Padua 1600). The title page explains that the volume is a 'book about a new condition Polish plait' (Librum de Plica novo Poloniae Morbo); see also Guesnet, 'Demonic Entanglements', 93-5.

21 Guesnet, 'Demonic Entanglements,' 96-7.

22 Frank A. Kafker and Serena L. Kafker, *The Encyclopedists as Individuals: A Biographical Dictionary of the Authors of the Encyclopédie* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1988), 254-7. See also Mechthild Fend, *Fleshing out Surfaces. Skin in French Art and Medicine, 1650-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017); and Kalumaitė-Kubeckienė, 'Phenomenon of *Plica polonica*', 60-1.

Germany, Hungary, the Breisgau, Alsatia, Switzerland, Flanders, where one can find some rare remnants.²³

As an enlightened author, Menuret de Chambaud obviously rejected assumptions of a demonic or magical origin of the matting of hair. Also, he considered the causal link between *Plica* and the omnipresence of Jews in Poland as prejudiced. This connection had been put forward from the mid-seventeenth century onwards especially in German language territories, where the term *Juden-Zopff* (Jewish plait) became part and parcel of medical discourse.²⁴ Menuret favoured a historical explanation, tracing back the appearance of this new condition to the Mongol incursions of the late middle ages. It is striking to see how this author, who would have demonstrated considerable restraint when rejecting some of the hypotheses put forward in earlier times about the *Plica*, would revel in graphic descriptions of past monstrosities and repeat exaggerated accounts of earlier chroniclers:

‘The invaders, evil-minded by nature, and sorcerers and poisoners, corrupted all the water in the country using the hearts which they had ripped out of the chests of their prisoners. They threw them into the rivers after having stuffed them with venomous herbs and fixated these with skewers. The infected water

23 ‘Plica Polonica’, in: *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres*, vol. 12 (Neuchâtel: Samuel Faulche, 1765), 767-70. The Breisgau as a region with frequent cases of *Plica* is also mentioned by Philippe Rodolphe Vicat, *Mémoire sur la plique polonoise* (Lausanne: François Grasset, 1775), 33. The author had worked for several years as a physician in Warsaw, Lithuania and Livonia.

24 Guesnet, ‘Demonic Entanglements’, 95-6.

killed some of those who drank it, and left the seed of this horrific disease in their blood. Later, this dangerous disposition of the humours was transmitted from father to child, which spread and multiplied the *Plica*.²⁵

Thus, the magical or demonic discourses of the past are replaced by the monstrosities associated with the peripheral regions of Europe Menuret discussed in this entry.

While simplistic prejudice would not be acceptable for this author, the quote clearly demonstrates an urge to dramatise the medical threat, and to define its origin outside Christian Europe, by ascribing it to foreign invaders. The projection operated on two levels: The dangerous condition goes back to an attack by the Asian invader of Poland, and thus constitutes an infringement of the boundaries of Europe as a whole. It was the elaborate description of Mongolian atrocities which, therefore, helped transform Poland into an arena of bizarre practices, exoticising this peripheral European region characterised by a loss of control, thus becoming a threat to health and physical integrity.

The Body and the Body-Politic

It was the new political context which gave these and other experts' reflections a new urgency, as the integration of formerly Polish and Lithuanian provinces into the fabric of the partitioning powers also required an assessment of the local populace, including an assessment of potential medical threats. An in-depth inquiry ordered by the Austrian imperial administration into the occurrence of the *Plica* in Galicia illustrates the perceived need to gain further understanding of a potential medical

25 'Plica Polonica', in *Encyclopédie*, 768.

threat to the Empire emanating from the newly acquired provinces. While these investigations perpetuated assumptions of the endemic and dangerous character of the *Plica*, the official inspectors stressed that local practices around matted hair such as embalming the matted hair with blessed wine and oil were superstitious practices not to be identified with the 'real' *Plica*.²⁶

It thus appears that an increased interest in public health matters in connection with issues of governance in the annexed territories triggered concerns about the *Plica*, and inversely, the phenomenon added urgency to the growing obsession with governance and control. Numerous authors of the period were aware of these concerns and encouraged the authorities to address this condition. But as the article in the *Encyclopédie* demonstrated, discussing the matting of hair had the added impact of portraying central and eastern Europe as exotic, uncanny, and awkward.

An example for such an expert report is the collection of anecdotal descriptions of a representative of the Austrian administration published as a collection of letters in 1787 by colonel Traunpaur. The small volume is a somewhat disorganised juxtaposition of observations on the newly introduced Austrian administration, the character of the populace, relevant religious and educational institutions, as well as anecdotes about the nobility and the numerous Jews. It is the relationship between the nobility and the Jews, the arbitrary rule of the former and violent treatment of the latter, which allowed the author to distinguish the tyranny of

26 Anton Tantner, 'Wahrheitsproduktion durch Auskämpfung. Zum Kampf gegen den Wichtelzopf,' in Martin Scheutz and Vlasta Valeš (eds), *Wien und seine WienerInnen. Ein historischer Streifzug durch Wien über die Jahrhunderte. Festschrift für Karl Vocelka zum 60. Geburtstag*, (Cologne and Vienna: Böhlau-Verlag, 2009), 221-34.

the pre-partition period from enlightened and beneficial Austrian rule.²⁷ The author repeatedly elaborated on the positive impact of the integration of the ‘Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria’ into the Habsburg Empire, overcoming the consequences of neglect, ignorance and dirt, characteristic of the former political order. In this discussion, the *Plica polonica* served a similar purpose like the numerous references to the tyranny of the aristocracy – as a symbol of a deeply rooted backwardness:

‘In the backwaters of the countryside you will find many people afflicted by a threatening and untreatable eczema, leading to thick, smelly knots, known in Latin as *plica polonica*. Some want to ascribe this disgusting and intolerable occurrence to the water; but with good reasons I assume it is rather the result of uncleanness, the drying of bacon in the open air, the consumption of strong and peppered beverages, and finally the exaggerated consumption of onions which the Polish peasant considers a treat. It is remarkable that the female sex is not affected by this condition, although it consumes distilled alcohol [Germ. *brandtwein*] in the same quantity as men.’²⁸

The description of matted hair as an unknown and threatening medical affliction, and its identification with Poland, served both narrative and rhetorical purposes. In

27 Alphonse Heinrich Traunpaur, *Dreyßig Briefe über Galizien oder Beobachtungen eines unparteyischen Mannes, der sich mehr als nur ein paar Monate in diesem Königreiche umgesehen hat* (Vienna and Leipzig: Wucherer und Beer, 1787, facs. ed. Berlin, undated). The legal innovations pertaining to the status of the Jews are among the author's favourite examples for the beneficial consequences of the first partition, and are illustrated by a long – probably fictitious – conversation with a rabbi, 112-22.

28 *Ibid.*, 76.

particular, it offered the possibility of othering this less well-known part of the continent.

Another example of this narrative strategy is one of the more successful travelogues of the period, the *Nachrichten über Polen* by Johann Joseph Kausch (1751-1825), an admirer of the political reforms undertaken under Poniatowski.²⁹ Introducing his travelogue, Kausch described the task of the traveller-author to report about anything he found noteworthy (Germ. *merckwürdig*), but he also warned:

'No idea is more relative than the one of the noteworthy; it is this quality which motivates the traveller-author to prefer one object of nature over the other for his description. The less specific the expertise with which one observes these objects, the more complex the maze where one gets lost without a thread of Ariadne. My travels were neither devoted to natural history nor to the arts, or politics or sentiments, neither educational nor economical, thus no specific focus at all; the noteworthy alone, as long as I was able to gaze at it, and worthy of the attention of the foreigner, determined my choice.'³⁰

The author thus fashions himself as a *flâneur ante litteram*, in contradistinction to an expert, though very much in dialogue with this alternative mode of perception.

Kausch's travelogue is divided into three parts: a discussion of the 'political fates' of

29 See Gerard Koziłek, 'Kauschs "Nachrichten über Polen" - Das Werk eines polonophilen Aufklärers', in *Reisen und Reisebeschreibungen*, 177-94.

30 Johann Joseph Kausch, *Nachrichten über Polen. Sine ire et studio. Erster Theil* (Salzburg: Mayr, 1793), XV.

Poland, a ‘national portrait of Poland (Germ. *Nationalgemälde Polens*),’ and a history and survey of Polish literature. *Plica* is discussed as an important detail in the portraiture of Poland, and the author seemed well aware of the interest for this condition, as specific to this country as it was dangerous:

‘It is my great pleasure to fulfil my promise to describe the *Weichselzopf* as I am sure that most of my readers are most curious to learn more about this condition of the hair which is, as is generally known, a national condition of the Poles.’³¹

Like Menuret, he traces the origin of the *Plica* to the medieval Mongolian incursions. The description of the condition which follows clearly emphasises its threatening and monstrous qualities. According to Kausch, *Plica* often occurred without prior symptoms, led to long and intense suffering, and was often lethal.³² The matted hair would form two to three massive plaits which would exude a repulsive odour. The local population would attempt to hide it by integrating it into the hairdo.³³ A crucial

31 Ibid., 177.

32 Ibid., 178, also for the following description.

33 This practice is also described in a letter by the wife of the former British ambassador to the High Porte, James Porter, to a certain Mme de Hochepeid, describing the courtiers at the palace of one of the Polish magnates, Prince Czartoryski, in the course of a journey through Poland in 1762: ‘Among them, I occasionally discovered some with the plica, a complaint of the country. One symptom, I believe, is blood oozing from the root of the hair. The hair being left to its extreme length – it being considered dangerous to cut it – is twisted round and round, till it forms a large knot at the top of the head, and I have heard, ultimately drops off.’ See James Porter, *Turkey; Its History and Progress: From the Journals and Correspondence of Sir James Porter, Fifteen Years Ambassador*

aspect from a point of view of governance and control of public health was the conviction that the fact that *Plica* was contagious. Kausch, for example, wrote:

‘The illness is contagious, it is neither the result of consumption of too much fat during lent or of uncleanness, only of a contagious germ, inoculated through touch (...) It can be contracted through the use of hats or caps of affected people, as well as through intercourse.’

Those affected by the illness would become carriers of the contagious germ, and also transmit it to their offspring: ‘Very often, it is an inborn condition. It is carried to other countries by infected Poles, and in the time of the [Saxonian duke-electors and Polish kings, F.G.] Augusts, when many Poles stayed in Dresden, it also spread here.’

One can safely assume that the references to sexual relations and procreation added to the peculiarities of *Plica*, as would the fact of its frequent occurrence among the Jews of Poland:

‘No estate and no body part is immune from this illness, the Jews and the common people are most affected, though [...] As the Jew is more superstitious than any other nation, he has many rules and views concerning this condition. He does not allow the plait to be cut, he wears it until it falls off, or he dies with it. To hasten this he has a most repulsive custom. He seeks

at Constantinople, Continued to the Present Time, with a Memoir of Sir James Porter, by his Grandson, Sir George Larpent (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1854), appendix, 377.

out an old, fallen off plait, drowns it in a bottle of brandy, and drinks a tiny amount from a small glass a few times every day. This makes the condition worse, and in case of a new plait, even proves lethal.’

In the introduction to these *Nachrichten über Polen*, Kausch had noted the scarcity in this ‘terra incognita’ of ‘noteworthy’ landmarks and remarkable landscapes.³⁴ Clearly, the description of a potentially lethal and contagious condition allowed to remedy this apparent lack of interest, and the author consciously chose to satisfy his readers’ curiosity and thirst for extraordinary things in far-away countries. In the context of the political transformations of the period, a discussion of potentially threatening medical conditions also added relevance to this travelogue, and the author’s observations. He identified both Poles travelling abroad as well as local Jews with their repulsive practices as potential carriers of this threat, mobilising fears of contagion and exoticising the potential sources of danger.

Travellers and Experts: Cross-Fertilising Discourses

Kausch’s reflections offer an instructive example of the problematic character of travelogues as a source of authentic intelligence. Without exception, the details and observations the author provided were taken from the *Chirurgisch-medicinische Abhandlungen*, a recent publication prominently discussing the *Weichselzopf* and its treatment. The author, the court physician Franciszek Leopold de la Fontaine (1756-

34 Ibid., XIX-XX.

1812), combined some theoretical and historical observations with a description of cases from his own medical practice.³⁵ What thus appears in Kausch's *Nachrichten über Polen* as intelligence gathered by a visitor was in reality based on excerpts from this recent publication. Thus, the observation about the peculiar Jewish custom to prevent the matting of hair through the consumption of alcohol is taken verbatim from *Chirurgisch-medicinische Abhandlungen*.³⁶

The *Chirurgisch-medicinische Abhandlungen* would emerge around 1800 as one of the most often quoted (though apparently not always referenced) source of knowledge about matted hair, not in the least because of nine engravings included at the end of the publication depicting examples of people and animals affected by *Weichselzopf*: a noble man (identifiable by the haircut and the moustache), a noble woman in expensive clothing, a Jew with a skullcap, long sidelocks and beard, a naked man with matted hair on his chest, in his arm pits and with matted pubic hair, a

35 Franciszek Leopold de la Fontaine, *Chirurgisch-medicinische Abhandlungen verschiedenen [sic] Inhalts Polen betreffend* (Breslau and Leipzig: Wilhelm Gottlieb Korn, 1792). The author is identified on the title page as a personal physician of Stanisław August Poniatowski and resident of Warsaw. Fontaine was born in Biberach/Württemberg and became court physician in Warsaw after several years of practice as pharmacist and physician, among others in Vienna. He was awarded a doctorate in medicine by the University of Halle in 1791. He was considered a leading medical authority in Stanisławian Warsaw, see Franciszek Kubacz and Ignacy Piotr Legatowicz, eds., *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. XVI (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy Imienia Ossolińskich Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1971), 408-9.

36 La Fontaine, *Chirurgisch-medicinische Abhandlungen*, 45. It should be noted that Kausch mentions de la Fontaine, however not on the pages where he summarises some of de la Fontaine's observations, but towards the end of his volume, emphasising de la Fontaine's expertise, see *Nachrichten über Polen*, 297-8.

poor man, a depiction of finger and toe nails deformed in consequence of the infection with the *Plica* (a phenomenon defined as *cornification* in medical scholarship of the period), and finally a dog and a horse, equally with matted hair. Rejecting assumptions about the occurrence of matted hair in various European regions (as claimed for example by Menuret in the *Encyclopédie*), de la Fontaine emphasised the contagious character of the condition, but also its endemic character in Poland.

The first section of the treatise is entirely dedicated to the *Weichselzopf*, including a brief discussion of earlier medical theories, a review of the symptoms and a proposition to differentiate a 'simple' and a 'complex' *Weichselzopf*, a 'benign' and a 'malign' one, a 'male' and a 'female' one.³⁷ After theoretical considerations about the requirements of treating the *Weichselzopf*, the author offers twenty 'observations', i.e. case studies of matted hair he had treated himself, including invasive surgery on the eyes of patients.³⁸ Later sections of the treatise, drafted as letters without date or addressee, return to the matting of hair as a condition on several occasions - when discussing the maladies of Poland in general (p. 107), those affecting prostitutes (p. 131) and Jews (p. 153).

The strong impact of the *Medicinish-chirurgische Abhandlungen* on the contemporary reading public appears from the multi-volume *Letters on Silesia, Cracow, Wieliczka, and the County of Glatz*, a travelogue by Johann Friedrich Zöllner

37 La Fontaine, *Medicinish-chirurgische Abhandlungen*, 5-31.

38 *Ibid.*, 51-96.

(1753-1804), published in 1792.³⁹ Departing from the traditions of apodemic literature, Zöllner drafted his travelogue as a collection of letters, thus emphasising the personal and affective dimension of travelling. Zöllner reflected on the matting of hair shortly after crossing the borders into Polish territories, describing an encounter in an inn in the small town of Będzin.⁴⁰ The description of the inn and the reflection on the case of *Plica* deserve to be cited at length:

‘The walls were covered in dirt [...] The only items in the room were two frail tables and a chair which had at some point in its past been covered by fabric. A pallet in the corner had only a thin layer of straw, pushed into its corners. A girl of around eight years was so dirty that it was impossible to tell whether it had fair or dark hair. Barefooted, it jumped to the room through the window and climbed on chair and pallet. A door led from this room to the bedroom of the inn-keeper, where several children were making terrible noise, with the main room of the inn adjacent to it. Here, Polish coachmen, servants and other rabble were shouting over each other [...] This racket was compounded by the wife of the inn-keeper starting to quarrel with her husband [...] You have never

39 Johann Friedrich Zöllner, *Briefe über Schlesien, Krakau, Wieliczka und die Grafschaft Glatz: auf einer Reise im Jahr 1791 geschrieben* (Berlin: Maurer, 1792-93), 261-4.

40 Another case of an author of the period to introduce the reader to Poland and the Poles with a description of neglect and dirt, part and parcel of which was the frequent occurrence of the matting of hair, is Jacques Henri Bernardin des Saint-Pierre (1737-1814), where the matting of hair indeed serves as initial observation about the Poles, see ‘Voyage on Pologne’, in *Œuvres posthumes de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. Mises on ordre et précédées de la vie de l’auteur par Louis Aimé-Martin* (Paris: Ledentu, 1833), 328-37, specifically 330.

encountered such uncleanliness of a female person. The vest was stuck to the shirt, and glued on to her skin. As I looked at her thick hair, hanging like roots over her neck, I fortunately did not think of the *Weichselzopf*,* as I would not have been able to eat whatsoever.’

The overwhelming experience of dirt, poverty and neglect culminates in an odd non-occurrence: in the moment the author described, he did *not* think of the Polish plait - had he done so, he would have not been able to eat. This adds further narrative significance to the illness introduced in this description of his encounters after entering Poland. In a lengthy footnote which has all the appearances of a reflection added later to observations written down during travel, the author offers some background about this condition:

‘The *Weichselzopf* is not just an intricate meshing in consequence of neglect and uncleanliness; it rather is a condition of its own endemic in Poland, Lithuania, Volhynia, and the Ukraine. Horses, cattle, dogs, sheep, even wolves and foxes are affected by it. It is impo'ssible to straighten the hair by combing it, and one must not cut off the hair if the ill person should not be subjected to the most terrible circumstances. While this terrible affliction – which also deforms fingernails – originates from the Vistula river,⁴¹ I do not believe the term is derived from this name, but rather from the verb *to wrap*⁴² and was colloquially known as *Wichselzopf* – an origin corroborated by the Latin term *Plica polonica.* The Adelung derives from

41 ‘Weichsel’ in German.

42 ‘Wickeln’ in German.

Wichtelzopf from *Wicht* (a traditional name for *demon*) and is equated with *Alpzopf* and *Mahrenklatte*. This condition is so common in Poland that among folkspeople, one in four or five is affected, and among the nobility and the affluent burghers one in fifteen or twenty.’

Kommentiert [TL2]: Dear Francois, can you tell me what the symbol * refers to. If its is italicizatyion, perhaps we should just do that. Are the different spellings of weichselzopf in the original, in which case we should insert [sic] where it is spelt incorrectly.

This footnote paraphrases some central notions about matted hair which had been part and parcel of the academic medical discussion since Sassonia had published his treatise about the *Plica* referred to above. It furthermore integrated the etymological observations from Adelung, at the time recognized as the leading author on the German language and its history.⁴³ The observations concerning the *Plica* affecting human beings and animals alike was, though less standard, still a common trope.⁴⁴ The inclusion of these observations concerning the *Plica* indicate that Zöllner became aware of de la Fontaine’s *Chirurgisch-medicinische Abhandlungen* while preparing his travelogue for print, and that he, unaware of this condition while travelling in Poland, understood retrospectively that he had encountered a case of the *Plica*. Thus,

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- 43 Johann Christoph Adelung, *Versuch eines vollständigen grammatisch-kritischen Wörterbuches der hochdeutschen Mundart*, 5 vols. (Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1774-1786), here vol. 5 (Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1786). For Adelung’s method in etymological deduction and the publishing history of his pioneering dictionary see Gerhard Dill, *Johann Christoph Adelungs Wörterbuch der ‘Hochdeutschen Mundart’* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 1992), 243-85, and for its quality as ‘dictionary of the enlightenment’ see Heidrun Kämper, “‘Sprache und Cultur in dem genauesten Verhältnisse’ – Kulturgeschichte und Lexikographie bei Johann Christoph Adelung’, in *Aufklärer, Sprachgelehrter, Didaktiker: Johann Christoph Adelung (1732-1806)*, ed. eadem, Annette Klosa, and Oda Vietze (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2008), 67-88, here 70.
- 44 Thus the Zedler encyclopedia would note that ‘in Hungary, animals are affected by the condition, in particular horses,’ see Johann Heinrich Zedler, *Universal-Lexikon Aller Wissenschaften und Künste*, vol. 55 (Leipzig and Halle: Zedler, 1748), col. 1681.

also in this case, the expert-knowledge of the highly reputed court physician de la Fontaine would inform the author of a travelogue, and significantly impacted his understanding of a phenomenon he was even not aware of when travelling.

A similar narrative strategy can be observed in the travelogue of William Coxe, archdeacon of Wiltshire (1748-1828) and a frequent tutor to travelling English nobles.⁴⁵ In contrast to Zöllner, the author discusses *Plica* not upon his arrival in the Polish provinces, but rather concludes the description of his travels through the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth with a few pages on the condition, which is then followed by a chapter devoted to his journey through Russia.⁴⁶ Coxe begins with a rather superficial but personal observation about the frequency of encountering matted hair, and identifying it with the medical condition known as *Plica polonica*:

Before I close my account of Poland, I shall just cursorily mention, that in our progress through this country we could not fail observing several persons with matted or clotted hair, which constitutes a disorder called *Plica Polonica*: it receives that denomination because it is as peculiar to Poland; although it is

45 William Coxe, *Travels into Poland, Russia, Sweden, and Denmark, Interspersed with Historical Relations and Political Inquiries*, 3 vols. (Dublin: Price et al. 1784).

46 A similar prominent position at the end of a travel account is to be found in *Voyage de deux Français en Allemagne, Danemark, Suède, Russie et Pologne fait en 1790-1792*, vol. 5 (Paris: Desenne, 1796), cited after Zawadzki, *Polska stanisławowska*, vol. 2, 675-727, here 726.

not unfrequent in Hungary, Tartary, and several adjacent nations, and instances of it are occasionally to be found in other countries.⁴⁷

Coxe then paraphrased a learned treatise about the matter, identifying ‘acid viscous humour penetrating into the hair’ as the source of the condition, and observed that this ‘disorder is thought hereditary; and is proved to be contagious when in a virulent state.’⁴⁸ Coxe invoked ‘the nature of the Polish air,’ ‘the unwholesome water’ and the ‘gross inattention of the natives to cleanliness’ as additional factors contributing to the ubiquity of the illness. As in the case of Zöllner’s retrospective understanding of having encountered *Plica*, there exists a strong connection between the personal observations of the traveller and the expert’s assessment he cites in support.

Temporarily exiled from pre-revolutionary France, the Jesuit Hubert Vautrin (1742-1822) spent five years (1777-82) as teacher in Poland. His ‘observer’s report’ about Poland followed apodemic standards quite closely, combining a description of geographic and geological observations with comments about the history of the Poles, their education, trade, the government, finances, and religious relations. A friend neither of the Polish type of Catholic observance, nor of Protestantism or Judaism, he wrote as a sceptical commentator. He opened the section about medical conditions with a citation from the *Horoscope politique de la Pologne*: ‘The ignorance of the Polish peasant is undoubtedly the consequence of serfdom; and perhaps, it also has some physical cause. Be it as it may, the head is among the Poles the body part most

47 Coxe, *Travels*, vol. 1, 280.

48 Ibid., citing Vicat, *Mémoire sur la plique polonoise*.

often affected by illnesses.⁴⁹ The *Plica polonica* is the only condition Vautrin mentioned in this section, followed by a reflection about the omnipresence of lice in all of Poland, and especially among the Jews of Poland. The author repeated the (incorrect) observation of the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert that local physicians had not written about this condition as it only affected the destitute, and proposed the hypothesis that the matting of hair was probably the consequence of the prevalence of scurvy and of the greasy and soft consistence of the hair of the local population. He compared the *Plica* to 'the matting of manes of our plowers' horses: I have seen some which formed long, meshed threads which the stable-boys attributed to the nocturnal activities of mad spirits.' Thus establishing an analogy between animals and Poles, Vautrin cited a common belief that the *Plica* had come from outside Poland, 'just as we ascribe to foreign countries all the illnesses which hurt our pride.'⁵⁰

Thus, Vautrin was conscious of the significant role of projections underlying most of the considerations concerning the matting of hair in eastern Europe. The travellers and experts writing about eastern Europe in general and Poland-Lithuania in particular often alluded to the monstrous and repulsive quality of *Plica*. By including it in prominent locations either at the beginning or the conclusion of reflections about the characteristics of Poland, they contributed to solidifying prejudice about the region in the period under consideration here. Similar conflation of the repulsive, the

49 Hubert Vautrin, *L'observateur en Pologne* (Paris: Giguet et Michaud, 1807), 294. The reference is to St. Zannowich, *Horoscope politique de la Pologne, de la Prusse, de l'Angleterre, etc* (Pastor Vecchio 1779).

50 Ibid., 296.

dangerous, the monstrous and the exotic would become a hallmark of nineteenth century medical discourse of *Plica*, and informed medical discourse in general and public health debates about the borderlands between Polish provinces on the one hand and Prussian and Austrian provinces on the other. One can point to Burkhard Eble, among the pioneers of dermatology and author of an authoritative reference work on skin and skin conditions, as a case of the translation of such prejudiced assumptions into authoritative medical writing:

The Poles wear caps which people affected by the Plica have worn, or insert a piece of a fallen off Plica in their own hair, after having soaked the plait in beer or another mucous liquid; women weave small bundles of hair to small, wick-like braids which they glue together with wax, resin or tar, and do not comb it for a long time; the Jews, as always, set themselves apart in their practices: they do drink several glasses of brandy taken from a bottle placed near a fallen off Plica of a Christian.⁵¹

The ironic take on the phenomenon which we find in Heinrich Heine's remarkable account of a journey to the lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1822 reflects the degree to which this fear of contamination had taken root in the minds of the contemporaries:

The [Polish] peasant is of good constitution, strong, and with the appearance of a soldier. His hair normally is fair; the long hair is in most cases worn

51 Burkhard Eble, *Die Lehre von den Haaren in der gesamten organischen Natur*, 2 vols. (Vienna: Heubner, 1831), here vol. 2: *Haare des Menschen*, 367.

Kommentiert [TL3]: Would Russian Poland be more accurate here or the Congress Kingdom of Poland

openly. Because of that, many peasants have the *Plica polonica* (Weichselzopf), a truly graceful condition which will be visited upon us as well once long hair will be in fashion.⁵²

Conclusion

Heine's light-hearted version of fears of contagion proved groundless – no epidemic of matted hair was ever recorded, neither in Germany, nor in Polish or other eastern European provinces. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, in a period of heightened interest in matters Polish, travellers and experts would reflect on a broad range of issues in their reports from the territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The human body and questions of public health gained in relevance in the context of the integration of Polish provinces into the administrative and societal fabric of the partitioning powers. In this context, discussing the matting of hair as a medical condition served several purposes. On a very basic level, it was expected to satisfy the readers' curiosity in out-of-the ordinary, *merckwürdig* aspects of the visited provinces. Describing the exotic and monstrous phenomenon of matted hair allowed for this, and emphasising the endemic and contagious character of *Plica* increased the relevance of this expert knowledge. As has been shown, medical expertise and the seemingly authentic, but always graphic reflection of reality in the travelogues, mutually reinforced a narrative of the essential difference of the Polish-

52 Heinrich Heine, *Ueber Polen. Geschrieben im Herbst 1822*, in *Heinrich Heine: Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke*, ed. Manfred Winfuhr, vol. 6 (Hamburg: Hoffmann & Campe, 1973), 55-80, here 58.

Lithuanian Commonwealth. This difference would be further mobilised in public health discourses of the nineteenth century and contributed to the development of containment measures to safeguard the physical integrity of adjacent countries and communities. The cross-fertilising message of travellers' accounts and experts' assessments would in the end prove more contagious than the matting of hair could have ever been.

