A Local Society in Transition
The Henryków Book and Related Documents

PIOTR GÓRECKI

This book consists of an annotated translation of a history of a Cistercian monastery known as the Henryków Book and of some thirty charters further illustrating that history. A substantial historical essay introduces these materials.

The monastery situated at Henryków, in the duchy Silesia, was founded and consecrated between 1222 and 1228, and endowed with an estate in those years and continuously thereafter. The Book was composed at the monastery itself, in three sections: the first and the third by its third abbot, Peter, in or soon after 1268, the second by an anonymous monk, in or soon after 1310. The charters were issued, between 1225 and 1310, by the dukes of Silesia and by others interested in the monastery and its estate: the bishops of Wrocław and Poznań, the monastery’s neighbors or donors, and their descendants.

Both the Henryków Book and the charters encompass a range of historical topics: the foundation of the monastery, and the resulting political and legal relationships; the history of each of the dozens of holdings included in the monastery’s estate; and the full roster of the bishops of Wrocław, the diocese where the monastery was situated. The second occupies most of the work in its entirety, making the Henryków Book a history of a substantial population, society, economy, pattern of lordship and power, spanning well over one full century before the work’s final redaction – in the words of the title, a local society in transition. The monastery’s foundation and its political implications are treated specifically in the first section of the Book, which is therefore an excellent entrée into a local world of politics and power centered upon the monastery. Moreover, that section is also highly interesting as a text. It actively negotiates the patterns of lordship and power with which it is concerned, through a variety of rhetorical and forensic strategies; it directly addresses, and reinterprets, the network of memory and of law affecting these issues; and it reflects both the biography and the literary imprint of its principal author, Abbot Peter.

The essay that precedes the translation explores these and related subjects in detail, which is designed as an independent introduction to contemporary medieval Poland as well as to the sources; they are further contextualized by the charters, which offer supplementary, and sometimes explicitly varied, perspectives on the events and relationships described in the Henryków Book. The result is a multilayered historical record of a monastery and an author in their local world; a distinct region of medieval Europe; and an interesting fragment of Cistercian history.
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MANUFACTURED IN CANADA
To Alan E. Bernstein and Richard Hellie
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I am also enormously indebted to a group of students which is, of course, too large to list by name, but whose imprint – collective yet ultimately individual – has shaped everything about this work. As the finished version of the translation took shape, I continuously used it as a primary source in a wide range of survey and undergraduate seminar courses at UCR; in late 1998, as a basis of a graduate seminar at the Department of Medieval Studies of the Central European University in Budapest; and as material in a team-taught course in the Summer University at the same institution in July 2005. These experiences have been invaluable, and I want to thank the students and colleagues at both institutions. I am especially grateful to János Bak, who generously invited me to Budapest to teach the graduate seminar at CEU, and encouraged me to teach at the Summer University some years later. On a related note, let me acknowledge an important article concerning a subject bearing on this book, written by a graduate of CEU, Grzegorz Zabiński, “A Pre-Cistercian Settlement of a Future Monastic Site: The Case of Henryków,” Quaestiones Medii Aevi Nova 10 (2005), 273–302, to which I obtained access after this book went to press.

Renata and Ania, as always, are present here in all kinds of ways, and so this work is yet another modest tribute to them. During the course of its writing and revision, my parents, Danuta and Jan Górecki, were a source of inspiration and strength, and role models of scholarly care and integrity; an earlier version of these acknowledgements was the last piece of prose written by me on which my father commented while confronting his final illness. This brings me to some
areas of gratitude that go back to the beginnings – of my work as a medievalist, and of this book. The theme of beginnings that animates so much of the Henryków Book prompts me to thank two remarkable teachers and friends, Robert Bartlett and the late Gerald Gunther. Finally, the book reflects my immeasurable gratitude to Alan Bernstein and Richard Hellie – Alan, for enabling me, during one annus mirabilis at Stanford University, to switch gears from a career path to a calling; Richard for welcoming me to the University of Chicago in 1983, introducing me to the value of translating historical sources with his own work on the Muscovite Ulozhenie, and directly inspiring me to undertake this translation. I am happy and honored to dedicate this book, jointly but to each in its fullness, to them.
Abbreviations

The following list provides abbreviations and sigla used for frequently cited works. Full details can be found in the Bibliography.

- Lex.M.A. Lexikon des Mittelalters
- Niermeyer Niermeyer, J. F. Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus
- P.S.B. Polski Słownik Biograficzny
- Piastowie Szczur, Stanisław and Krzysztof Ożóg, ed. Piastowie Leksykon biograficzny
- Rodowód Jasiński, Kazimierz, Rodowód Piastów śląskich.
- S.P. Plezia, Marian, ed. Słownik łaciny średniowiecznej w Polsce
- S.U., 1 Appelt, Heinrich, ed. Schlesisches Urkundenbuch, vol. 1
- S.U., 6 Irgang, Winfried, and Daphne Schadenwaldt, ed. Schlesisches Urkundenbuch, vol. 6
- S.Sp. Słownik Staropolski
The Henryków Book and Its Contexts

1 The importance of the sources

Undergraduates interested in the study of the past are invariably perplexed to discover that that past is a subject of strong disagreement among professional historians. Contrary to their initial intuitive sense that, once it has occurred, the past is fixed and accessible as such, our best students promptly learn instead that the conceptual skill driving our discipline is a confrontation of widely divergent interpretations – sometimes by means of outright debate.1 In turn, the professional historians themselves greatly benefit by placing that fact right at the center of instruction, because teaching inevitably demands from us a rigorous clarification of those contested historiographical issues. One kind of material that may be used in this way is historiography.2 Another is a sample of primary sources, selected in order to reflect interesting and currently contested historical issues. That is the material presented here.

The primary sources that follow are translated from Latin. They include a narrative history of a Cistercian monastery and of its estate, and a selection of charters further documenting that history. The monastic history and the charters span, at their widest range, the mid-twelfth and the early fourteenth centuries. Their principal subject is the monastery established between 1222 and 1228 at Henryków (Heinrichau) in the duchy of Silesia, currently in southwestern Poland, situated about fifty kilometers to the south of Wrocław, the principal city of that province and the seat of its diocese (see Maps 1–3).3 The charters were


3. A superb introduction to the province of Silesia, especially to the region and duchy of Wrocław, is Richard C. Hoffmann, Land, Liberties, and Lordship in a Late Medieval
issued by the rulers of the duchy of Silesia, and, in fewer cases, by their cousins who ruled the other Polish duchies; by the bishops of Wrocław and of Poznań; and by other authors. These sources are interesting for a variety of reasons; as with any good historical material, the exact range of interest is best defined by the readers themselves. As a point of departure let me note three big issues, or problems, that have recently elicited much interest (and much disagreement) among historians, and upon which this monastic history and the related documents shed direct light.

The first is the medieval “frontier.” This construct is currently understood by historians in several ways. Some view it principally in spatial terms: either as a type of space, adjoining some other region or situated between two or more other regions; or as a particular region of Europe, the Iberian Peninsula for example. Others consider the frontier above all as a dynamic process: the patterns of interaction – social, political, economic, religious, cultural – within some population or territory thus defined, or between the populations and territories to which it is peripheral. To yet other scholars, the “frontier” is interesting above all as an idea, or a state of mind, held by some historical population, by medieval historians today, or both, and useful for a variety of classificatory purposes.4

The second big issue, or problem, is medieval “Europe” – usually viewed as an aspect of an even bigger problem, namely “Europe” in general as a historical entity. Like frontier, this construct may be understood principally in spatial terms – that is, as one of the major geographic regions of world history, along with the Near and the Far East, pre-Columbian America, pre-colonial Africa, and others, each of which may be subject to similar analysis. Alternatively, “Europe” may be viewed in dynamic terms, as a cultural unit that in the course of the Middle Ages was either “made,” or “transformed,” or “unified;” or that, on the contrary, remained, and now remains, irreducibly “diverse.” Also like frontier, Europe, too, may be interesting above all as an idea, or an “invention,” held by historians and others today, and by the past populations whom the historians study.5

The third major issue is the medieval locality, understood broadly as that “small world” which made up the basic parameters of human existence, and which entailed, in a seamless whole, community, production, exchange, spirituality, emotion, power, conflict, and the law. 6 In turn, the locality thus understood is an aspect of yet another kind of history, namely the history of a region – a province, a lordship, a town, or some other substantial unit of space and society. This kind of history has long been represented by substantial, one- or two-vol-


Of course, these major subjects are closely interrelated. For instance, the question of the medieval meanings of *Europe* is explicable, at least in part (and, as always, not without controversy), in terms of Europe’s “frontiers,” above all their functions and their transitions – a line of analysis which immediately raises the meanings of *frontier* and of its conceptual twin, *core*. Do these words refer to a point of contact? A kind of space? A process? Something else? Such questions may be (and indeed have been) addressed in terms of a close analysis of particular places or regions, peasannies, town populations, merchants and other social intermediaries, ethnically diverse groups, lordships, laws, and much else – in short, in terms of the constituent topics that make up the third big subject just noted, that is, local and regional history.

The sources translated here were produced in a macro-region of medieval Europe whose history raises exactly the three big issues just noted. That macro-region is “Eastern” (or, more currently, “East Central”) Europe.9 Considered in its entirety, the region has long been viewed as a “frontier” of the Continent. Thus, today, it offers us a conceptual and empirical test case of what we mean by

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frontier, and by core10 – considerations that inevitably shed light on the bigger question of the existence, formation, and indeed reality, of that Europe whose frontier it (in some sense) was.11 Yet readers expecting to reach global resolutions of issues that are drawn this broadly will, at first glance, be disappointed, because in these sources East Central Europe is represented in exceedingly local terms. The story the sources tell – the circumstances they narrate, the relationships they describe, the memories they reflect – is circumscribed within a radius of, at the outermost, a bit over ten kilometers around the monastery itself.12

These sources also, though less directly, reflect a bigger horizon: the Polish principalities of Silesia, Great Poland, and Little Poland; Germany (mentioned once with that word), including the newly colonized German province of Meißen; pagan Prussia; Polish towns, especially Wrocław, Głogów, Poznań, and Kraków; and (on one occasion, and very obliquely) Rome. One of these wider geographic horizons coincides approximately with medieval Poland between the late twelfth and the early fourteenth centuries. Thus, the sources are among other things, records of Polish history,13 and may of course be used to teach that subject, or more generally the history of East Central, or Eastern, or northern Europe.14

10. Perhaps the most important statement of a historiographical contrast between the approaches to this big problem today – not framed as a polemic or a debate, but a clear and fascinating reflection of conceptual difference – is, on the one hand, Bartlett, Making, and, on the other, Berend, At the Gate. See the brief remarks (on this and other conceptual issues) by Janet Nelson in her enthusiastic review of Berend, American Historical Review 107 (2002), 1279–80; see also Piotr Górecki, “Tworzenie Europy” Roberta Bartletta w kontekście anglosaskich badań historycznych nad początkami i kształtowaniem się Europy [Robert Bartlett’s The Making of Europe in the context of English-language scholarship on the origins and formation of Europe], in Robert Bartlett, Tworzenie Europy. Podbój, kolonizacja i przemiany kulturowe, 950–1350, trans. Grażyna Waluga (Poznań: Poznańskie Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk, 2003), 505–15.

11. In contrast to Bartlett’s strong confidence, which I share, that Europe and its regions are specifiable constructs in the medieval period and beyond (Górecki, “Tworzenie,” 512–14), note the skeptical (and, themselves, strongly differing) views of Borgolte, Europa, throughout, and Norman Davies, Europe: A History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 7–10, 14–56.

12. The particulars in the rest of this paragraph are thoroughly explained in the subsequent, topical sections of the present essay, and illustrated in the chart and the maps.

13. By “Poland,” “Polish” towns, peasants, or history, and so forth, I mean (as I have meant throughout my work [Economy, 29, n. 1, and Parishes, 7, n. 24]), the region of the Continent ruled by the Piast dynasty, inhabited by a Slavic population to which its members and foreigners referred as Poloni, and which, at different points between the tenth and the fourteenth centuries, attracted immigrants from elsewhere, above all Germany.

14. In conjunction with the superb series of translated, and tacitly edited, sources concerning this region of Europe, currently underway at the Central European University in Budapest, for which see most recently Gesta Principum Polonorum: The Deeds of the Princes of the Poles, ed. and trans. Paul W. Knoll and Frank Schaer (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2003), and the general editors’ remarks at vii–viii.
Likewise, because in the course of this period Silesia, and thus the Henryków region, became first a part of Bohemia, then (until 1945) of Germany, they also illustrate Czech and, much more so, German history. However, apart from scholarly audiences specialized in national or in macro-regional terms, these sources should interest general medievalists simply because of the wide range of subjects they address. To illustrate this point, let me return to my three big issues.

First, the “frontier.” The Henryków region, and the people who inhabited it at different points between, say, 1160 and 1310, comprised a “frontier” in several senses of that word. Here was an area of both old and new settlement, subject to both old and new lordship. This was also a “frontier” in a local sense – that is, a demographic and economic periphery within Silesia itself, situated in an intermediate zone between old (principally Polish) and new (initially Polish, thereafter increasingly German) subregions of rural and urban settlement. For this reason, the Henryków region was also a stage for interethnic contact and interaction. Moreover, that periphery itself extended, at its own edge, toward a specific boundary perimeter: a segment of a large, deliberately created, defensive border zone encompassing the duchy of Silesia in its entirety, called the przesieka (a “clearing”) in Polish, and the hach (a “hedge”) in German. Finally, viewed on the largest scale, the Henryków region was one of thousands of places within East Central Europe, that macro-region of the Continent into which, in the net, foreigners migrated from its other macro-regions (especially, but not exclusively, from Germany), during the century and a half spanned by our documents.

The matter of scale brings me to “Europe.” Readers of Robert Bartlett will readily identify in this region some of his indices of a Continent-wide cultural integration. Our story begins with one instance of expansion of the Cistercian Order by filiation, a process long-standardized in regions further to the west, and evidently replicated here in that standardized form. Likewise, the story occurs, right from its outset, within a well-established context of bishoprics, local or parish churches, and practices of possession, assessment, payment, and consumption of tithes. At one moment, crusading enters the picture, as an important actor departs on an expedition against the pagan Prussians. Several more instances add up to a vivid case study of what Bartlett calls the “aristocratic diaspora” that bridged major regions of the Continent, and of its impact upon this local world.

On the other hand, readers of Michael Borgolte will discover here regional, even local, differences, or areas of specificity, that seem to be irreducible and permanent. Examples include the recurring image of the good Piast duke and of his evil counterpart; the statuses, and the collective activities, of the indigenous,

16. See nn. 259–60 below.
17. For monastic, especially Cistercian filiation, nn. 133, 301 below.
18. Chapter 46.
Polish peasants, both previously settled in the region, and migrants into it; ethnic classifications, especially the dichotomy between Poles and Germans, and, in one late instance, between both these groups on the one hand and the Jews on the other; legal systems and institutions, especially “Polish” and “German” land law and procedure and their alternatives; and much else. Readers of Nora Berend will find it convenient to view all the types of people and social features just noted, as interrelated, mutually influential, “cells” (in a social sense of that metaphor), engaged, if you will, in a permanent, ongoing negotiation of difference – and neither tending toward, not actually producing, any one unifying, systemic outcome. Finally, the material for such considerations inevitably shifts the reader’s attention to the concrete: to those hundreds of transactions, and dozens of well-documented people, which and who make up one “small world” of medieval Europe.

In addition, the sources are interesting as texts. They are, of course, two very different types of text. The monastic history is a narrative, although it incorporates charters, whereas the charters are principally records of particular transactions (or sequences of transactions), although they, in turn, incorporate narrative material. Both types of sources have long elicited a specialized, and sometimes highly technical, scholarly interest. The most recent phase of that interest has been underway since about 1990. During this period, the text has emerged as an autonomous object of study, deliberately distinguished from the reality to which it supposedly refers. This recent attention to text on its own terms transcends our profession. It has emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century out of the “linguistic turn,” by which is meant a fascination shared by a long generation of historians, anthropologists, and literary scholars with language and representation; and with the implications of language and representation for objective knowledge.19

This intellectual ferment has affected medieval historiography on several levels. Paradoxically, one of its outcomes is a return to a very old historiographical tradition, namely source analysis and criticism in the grand style: a close attention to matters of genre, trope, composition, and other elements of literary form; a renewed, systematic examination of particular fragments of medieval writing, such as preambles of royal charters; an identification of model texts, textual transmission, and textual adaptation; and more. Another outcome is, in every sense, historiographically new. In fact, it is often framed as a strong revision, or an outright rejection, of the aims and assumptions of earlier analysis and

19. Medievalists have generally pulled back from the most radical, or skeptical, implications of that last question; two important exceptions to that caution (very different from one another) are Kathleen Biddick, The Shock of Medievalism (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), and Philippe Buc, Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). For an introduction to this subject, see Michael Stanford, An Introduction to the Philosophy of History (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 183–205, 227–62.
criticism of sources. This is an interest in what might be called the agency behind the text, and the agency embedded within it.

The former kind of agency is reflected in a new search, today, for the meaning of the medieval author. The latter type of agency is an attribute of the text itself. We now recognize that texts themselves work, or – to paraphrase John Austin – that one can do things with texts. One area of reality which texts are understood to affect is memory – especially the kind of memory that is shared by groups, and that historians and others call collective or social memory. Over the past fifteen years, we have experienced an outburst of studies devoted to the ways in which texts function as reflections, or as repositories, or as sources of memory (and of its converse, oblivion) in a variety of past and present societies. In its own turn, this outburst is a result of a fortuitous conjunction of several disparate interests. One, arising directly from psychology, concerns memory’s cognitive aspects: the act of remembering, the processes or dynamics behind remembering, and the relationship of remembering to other aspects of cognition. Another, an aspect of the history of ideas, focuses on two cognitive dimensions of memory, as experienced by past populations: mnemonics, meaning active and deliberate approaches to the creation and retention of memory; and theories of memory, that is, the ideas in terms of which memory and oblivion were conceptualized in the past. A third area of interest concerns...


the meanings and the functions of social groups, including the problem of memory (and oblivion) as a type of group experience.25

This interest has identified – distilled, as it were, from among other phenomena – memory as a central element of past reality. This outcome is interesting on its own terms: memory is now a dimension of the past no less real, and no less important, than are other cognitive events, such as knowledge, emotion, or belief. In addition, memory usefully frames other phenomena. For example, Mary Carruthers’ work on mnemonics in monasteries, or Janet Coleman’s essays on ancient and medieval ideas about memory, tell us much about medieval learning – understood as an activity, and as an area of knowledge. Another example concerns memory and groups. Because, as is now clear, memory (and oblivion) may be, and typically are, experienced by groups, memory helps us define what we mean by a group. To put it differently, a group may emerge – indeed, it may meaningfully exist – specifically insofar as its members share common memories (or, which is much the same thing, what they believe to be common memories). Thus, memory relates to group “consciousness,” or group “identity.”

Because different kinds of groups may experience memory in different ways, memory further serves historians as a criterion for identifying specific medieval groups. We now have a legacy of excellent studies treating memories specific to peasants, to women, to monks or nuns, to families (including ruling dynasties), to “peoples” (gentes), and to other types of collectivities.26 At different moments in its historiography, collective memory has contributed to our understanding of status, gender, institutions, the law, family and kinship, the transition of “the year 1000,”27 ethnicity, “national” identity or consciousness,28 and much else. The


26. Fentress and Wickham, Social Memory, 87–143; Geary, Phantoms, 62–64, 68–69, 177–79; Remensnyder, Remembering, passim; and all the articles in van Houts, Medieval Memories, especially: Matthew Innes, “Keeping It in the Family: Women and Aristocratic Memory, 700–1200” (17–35); Patricia Skinner, “Gender and Memory in Medieval Italy” (36–52); Kathleen Quirk, “Men, Women and Miracles in Normandy, 1050–1150” (53–71); Renée Nip, “Gendered Memories from Flanders” (113–31); Fiona Griffiths, “Nuns’ Memories or Missing History in Alsace (c. 1200): Herrad of Hohenbourg’s Garden of Delights” (132–49).

27. Geary, Phantoms, passim.

28. Susan Reynolds, “Medieval Origins Gentium and the Community of the Realm,” History 68 (1983), 375–90; Fentress and Wickham, Social Memory, 173–99; and the earlier studies in Poland and the former Czechoslovakia, concerning the subject which the authors usually framed as “national” identity, yet which is identical with one aspect of what is elsewhere conceptualized as collective memory: Dawna świadomość historyczna w Polsce, Czecho i Słowacji [Former historical consciousness in Poland, Bohemia, and Slovakia], ed. Roman Heck (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1978); Jacek Banaszkiewicz, Kronika Dzierzwy. XIV-wieczny kompendium historii ojczyzny [Dzierza’s Chronicle: a fourteenth-century compendium of native history] (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy
reader will readily note that, based on the *Henryków Book*, we may add to the above list: Poles and Germans; the monks of one particular monastery; the cathedral chapters of Wrocław and of Poznań; the courts of the Piast dukes; communities of local knowledge; and (again) more.29

For medieval historians, memory is unavoidably mediated by texts. For this reason, another subject that memory helps us frame is the text itself. In my view, memory is the crucial variable behind those dimensions of the text that relate to agency – that is, the dimensions that affect what a text does, or what can be done with it. In order to unpack this rather abstruse proposition, let me begin with a deliberately simplified schema of the relationship of text to memory. First, a text may be a record: a transcription of words actually stated or believed to have been stated, or a narration of events that have actually transpired, or that are believed to have transpired. In that capacity, the text works as an alternative to memory, since it expresses in written form material that is otherwise retained (or lost) by the mind. Second, a text may reflect memory. That is, it may logically assume, or implicitly refer to, some area of knowledge which it does not record, in the sense just noted, on its face.

Third, a text may be a repository of memory. This relationship includes record and reflection, but is not limited to them. The full knowledge conveyed by a text may well extend beyond its explicit content, or its logical assumptions or implications. For example, the Book’s frequent references to “the territory of Henryków,” or to “the noble and mediocre,” presume that these phenomena

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were generally known and clear, and thus they neither state, nor imply what they encompassed or meant. Finally, a text may be a source of memory. This role, too, includes the above possibilities; the simplest way to use a text as a “source” is to consult it, for its explicit record, or for its implicit information, or for the knowledge it assumes on the part of the audience and does not convey. Rosamond McKitterick opened this whole subject in 1989 by reminding us (very helpfully) that texts are interesting in part because someone actually read them, and, directly or tacitly, drew knowledge from them. In addition, however, the text may be actively structured, or actively used, or both, in order to affect what is remembered—and therefore, in the longer term, what is known.

An intriguing mark of the recent surge of interest in the text is strong scholarly resistance against the simple, or the straightforward, interpretation of these four possibilities. That resistance is usually framed as a rhetorical refutation of several (typically unattributed) propositions: that the text is a “transparent” venue to some reality; that it provides direct “access” to it; that it corresponds with it; or that (to turn to my own metaphor of reflection) it “mirrors” an external reality. Despite (or perhaps because of) their occasional stridency, such critiques have not, at least among most medievalists, successfully undermined the basic, intuitively empiricist notions of reference. Instead, they have complicated, and enriched, our understanding of the link between the text and some real, past world—forcing us (among other things) to devote attention to the four possibilities of my simplified schema, especially to the text considered as a repository of memory about an external world, and as an active source of that memory.

These relationships between text and memory may relate to the text’s composition—its arrangement, especially the sequence and relative detail of presentation, its literary (especially rhetorical) emphasis, its mnemonic features, and its visual aspects; or to the earlier sources, oral or written, upon which the text draws; or to the manner in which it draws upon those earlier sources, whether by aural transmission, direct incorporation, paraphrase, new redaction, or elaboration; and to its ultimate form as an accumulation of those earlier sources. A text may thus be a composite document, an “archive” of earlier texts—each of which is related to memory in the ways just noted. Moreover, all these aspects of a text may be products of an intentional design—a purpose, perhaps indeed a strategy—aimed at shaping, modifying, interpreting, and sometimes obliterating what is remembered. This design, the intentionality and the presumed future active use

expressed by the text, is exactly what I am calling the text’s agency. The Henryków Book reflects, and expresses, agency in that sense. In order to illustrate this proposition in depth, let me situate the Book in context of its genre, its authorship, and several areas of reality with which it engages, and which it was evidently designed to affect.

2 Purpose, genre, and structure of the Henryków Book
The purpose of the history of the Henryków monastery is quite straightforward, and is explicitly identified by its two identifiable authors. The narrative was written specifically in order to serve the monks as a source of reliable knowledge against current or potential enemies. What is considerably more complicated is the genre of which this particular history is an instance. Like other medieval historical writings, the Henryków Book seamlessly incorporates several types of historical prose. It is a local chronicle – that is, a description of a sequence of past events, chronologically arranged, and spanning several generations. It pertains specifically to a monastery, and is therefore a monastic chronicle. It concerns one particular type of monastery, an individual Cistercian community. Thus, it fits into a long tradition of Cistercian historiography extending back to the foundation story of Cîteaux and of the Cistercian Order, elaborated continuously since the first years of the twelfth century.

The Book is also a monastic cartulary, that is, a transcription of charters issued to the monks of Henryków by the dukes of Silesia, the bishops of Wrocław, and other authors, intended as a convenient source of access to those documents.