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Jews "Holding the Keys to the Church" and the Posthumous Career of Zelman Wolfowicz of Drohobych

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Abstract At the end of the nineteenth century in the historiography and popular writing of the three nationalities living in what was then Habsburg Galicia—Polish, Jewish, and Ukrainian—there was an ongoing debate about the motif of the alleged leasing of Orthodox churches by Jews in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The motif of the Jews "holding the keys to the church" was intended, in its own way, to justify the anti-Jewish nature of the Khmelnytsky Uprising of 1648, as well as later rebellions in Ukraine. The problem, however, was that most testimonies of such practices came from literary rather than historical sources. Therefore, the discovery in the archival sources of the character of Zelman Wolfowicz (ca. 1680–1757) from Drohobych, a factor of the starostess Dorota Tarłowa and an informal administrator of the estate, who was sentenced to death for all kinds of economic and criminal offences against the population of the demesne, could have held the key evidence confirming the thesis of the oppression of the Ukrainian people by Jewish leaseholders under the authority of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In Zelman Wolfowicz's case, no confirmation was found that he ever "held the keys to the church." Nevertheless, he was associated with this practice by means of a misread and misunderstood folk song, whose hero happened to bear the same name: Zelman. The power of legend, combined with antisemitic stereotypes, has caused both historiography and ethnography to bolster this image while ignoring the source evidence.

Keywords Drohobych · Jewish leaseholders · Zelman Wolfowicz · Orthodox church · Folk songs

"Goes, goes Zelman"

One of the pictures from the cycle "History of Drohobych," painted in the 1930s by Feliks Lachowicz, a local artist highly praised by Bruno Schulz himself,[1] is entitled "Goes, goes Zelman" (fig. 1).

The painting captures a genre scene that takes place in front of Drohobych's most beautiful historic landmark, the seventeenth-century wooden church of St. George, located on a hill on the outskirts of the town. In the foreground, a blind wandering hurdy-gurdy player (*lirnyk*) is sitting on the

[1]Bruno Schulz, *Artyści z Drohobycza, Lilien i Lachowicz*, ed. Wiera Meniok and Grzegorz Józefczuk (Lublin, 2015).

Figure 1. Feliks Lachowicz, "Goes, goes Zelman" (1932–1934), from the cycle "History of Drohobych" (1932–1939), permission by the Museum of the Lubomirski Princes at the Ossoliński National Institute, Wrocław, nr. inw. I.r.p. 562.

grass in front of the church. Behind him, two girls in richly decorated folk costumes are dancing and singing. Further on, between the church and the bell tower, a dozen or so people are waiting for an approaching carriage drawn by two white horses. The carriage is painted at such a distance that only the shape of the headgear of one of its passengers allows us to identify this person as a Jew. The painting, similar to the other works in this cycle, is accompanied by a calligraphed inscription. The text below the image reads: "Goes, goes Zelman – The people sing joyfully, because soon the doors of St. George's Church will be opened to them."[2] Which event from the history of Drohobych did Feliks Lachowicz decide to immortalize in this painting? Who is this Zelman? Why do the faithful wait for him in front of the locked church, singing and dancing "joyfully"?

The title of the painting is easy to recognize: these are the first words of a folk song still sung today outside Orthodox and Uniate churches in western Ukraine at Easter time. However, to understand the meaning of the painting, it is necessary to refer to the two threads of interconnected Jewish, Polish, and Ukrainian history that today have slipped from popular memory, but which provoked lively discussion at the turn of the twentieth century between those three historiographies, which were just maturing in what was then Habsburg Galicia, to which Drohobych belonged.

The first of these threads is the controversy over the "leasing" of Orthodox churches by Jews in Ukraine under the rule of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This allegedly caused that Jews "held the keys to the Orthodox churches" and collected fees for opening them for Christian religious ceremonies. The second thread was the activity of a certain Zelman Wolfowicz—a Jewish factor and informal administrator of the Drohobych demesne in the first half of the eighteenth century, who was sentenced to death for abusing the inhabitants of the estate in 1755. This historical figure became popular in local historiography in the second half of the nineteenth century. The title of Lachowicz's painting would appear to suggest that Zelman Wolfowicz, who is depicted in a legend as exceptionally greedy, was one of those Jewish leaseholders who charged fees from Christians for opening the doors of the Orthodox church. The painting seems to artistically present current historical and ethnographic knowledge at the time of its creation in the mid-1930s. It may be puzzling why this rather trivial motif was chosen to serve as commemoration for one of the most important historical events in the history of the town, whose origins date back to the eleventh century. The answer must be sought in the

[2]The whole cycle of the Drohobych paintings by Lachowicz, now in the collections of the Library of the Ossoliński National Institute in Wrocław, has been published in the album *Drohobycz Feliksa Lachowicza*, ed. Beata Długajczyk et al. (Olszanica, 2009).

way historians and ethnographers participated in the production of power and nation-building processes since the mid-nineteenth century and how this phenomenon coincided with the local reality of Drohobych.

This study analyzes how the thread of "Jews holding the keys to the church" became connected with the story of Zelman Wolfowicz, an undoubtedly historical figure, but one who is surrounded by legends, in the creation of which historiography and ethnography of the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century also played a significant role. I begin with a summary of the state of the discussion on the motif of "Jews leasing Orthodox churches" during the period when Zelman's figure began to be the subject of historical research, gradually entering first into local history, and then into national historical imagery. I draw attention to why this motif was so important in the process of nation-building in Ukrainian lands at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and then describe how local historians reconstructed the fate of Zelman Wolfowicz and what meanings they attributed to his story. I also point out the importance that folklore data had for them and how the identification of the character of "Zelman" from Ukrainian folklore with the historical figure of Zelman Wolfowicz took place, employing him as alleged "evidence" in crafting justifications for antisemitic attitudes in the context of the construction of Polish and Ukrainian national identity. The identification of the ethnographic and historical Zelman to advance an antisemitic argument was not the simple result of a paucity of documentary sources or their erroneous analysis. In fact, it was an intentional error, since concurrently a few scholars, including the father of Ukrainian historiography, Mykhailo Hrushevsky, more or less successfully demonstrated the fallacy of identifying these two figures. For years, however, their findings were ignored by the mainstream narrative of Zelman Wolfowicz, as evidenced by the Lachowicz painting. This analysis of the story of Zelman Wolfowicz as a Jew "holding the keys to the church" is only a contribution to the often-described phenomenon of the ideological role of history and ethnography in nation-building and conflict creation. It is, however, a contribution of a particular kind, as it allows for an extremely precise dissection of the mechanisms that were used for this purpose.

Jews "Holding the Keys to the Church"

The decades-long controversy regarding the leasing of Orthodox churches by Jews, which inflamed the historical imagination at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has already been treated quite extensively. The occurrences of this motif in literary fiction have been discussed in detail by

George G. Grabowicz[3] and Myroslav Shkandrij,[4] while historical issues related to it have been addressed in studies by Frank E. Sysyn,[5] Judith Kalik,[6] and Zenon Kohut,[7] among others. These researchers have traced the origins of this motif back to 1649, finding them in a work by the Polish devotional author Paweł Ruszel, entitled "Heaven's Favor" (*Fawor niebieski*), which discussed the causes of the outbreak of the Khmelnytsky Uprising in Ukraine in 1648.[8] By the early eighteenth century, the motif had already penetrated Ukrainian historiography: it can be found in the Cossack chronicle by Hryhorii Hrabianka[9] as well as in the Latin-language history of the city of Lviv by the canon Jan Józefowicz.[10] In the eighteenth century, the motif probably also made its way into folklore, and its most famous rendition was recorded in the mid-nineteenth century by Panteleimon Kulish, in his "Duma on the Oppression of Ukraine by Jewish Leaseholders":

> They rented all the Cossack churches in glorious Ukraine.
> When God sent a child to a Cossack or a peasant,
> The father could not go to the priest for a blessing,
> But had to go to a Jewish leaseholder and give him six small coins
> To open the church,
> So that his child could be baptized.
> And if the Lord willed that a Cossack or a peasant give his child in marriage,
> The father could not go to the priest for a blessing,
> But had to go to a Jewish leaseholder and give him a stamped thaler

[3] George G. Grabowicz, "The Jewish Theme in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Ukrainian Literature," in *Ukrainian-Jewish Relations in Historical Perspective*, ed. Howard Aster and Peter J. Potichnyj, 2nd ed. (Edmonton, 1990), 327–42.

[4] Myroslav Shkandrij, *Jews in Ukrainian Literature: Representation and Identity* (New Haven, 2009), 11–19.

[5] Frank E. Sysyn, "The Cossack Insurrections in Jewish-Ukrainian Relations," in Aster and Potichnyj, *Ukrainian-Jewish Relations in Historical Perspective*, 31–42.

[6] Judith Kalik, "The Orthodox Church and the Jews in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth," *Jewish History* 17 (2003): 229–37.

[7] Zenon E. Kohut, "The Khmelnytsky Uprising, the Image of Jews, and the Shaping of Ukrainian Historical Memory," *Jewish History* 17 (2003): 141–63.

[8] See Serhii Plokhy, *The Cossacks and Religion in Early Modern Ukraine* (Oxford, 2001), 204, for the English translation of the entire excerpt from Ruszel's text relating to this issue.

[9] Hryhorii Hrabjanka, *The Great War of Bohdan Xmel'nyc'kyj* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

[10] Jan Józefowicz, *Kronika miasta Lwowa od roku 1634 do 1690: Obejmująca w ogólności dzieje dawnej Rusi Czerwonej, a zwłaszcza historyą arcybiskupstwa lwowskiego w tejże epoce* (Lviv, 1854), 83.

To open the church,
So that his child could be married.[11]

The dumas, which were recorded in the nineteenth century, are wrongly regarded as historical testimonies dating back to the period of the Khmelnytsky Uprising, i.e., the mid-seventeenth century. As Myroslav Shkandrij wrote: "Regrettably, the dumas are still often uncritically accepted as authentic and irrefutable eyewitness evidence,"[12] whereas they should rather be analysed in the context of the nation-building debates of the nineteenth century, on a par with the use of this motif in Nikolai Gogol's *Taras Bul'ba* (1835).[13]

From the historian's point of view, however, this was not enough, because the only known testimonies of this reprehensible practice of the Polish nobility at that time were of a literary nature, so the search for legal documents began, all the more so because behind the historical discussion, there were in fact sharpened controversies between national ideologies. Proving that the leasing of Orthodox churches by Jews was common mainly occupied Ukrainian historians.[14] Jewish historians, on the other hand, argued that if this did happen from time to time, it was an isolated phenomenon, on a small scale and within a limited geographical scope. The fiercest discussion on the subject flared up in 1909, when the Kyiv-based Jewish historian Ilya Galant[15] published an article in the St. Petersburg's *Evreiskaia Starina* entitled: "Did Jews Lease the Orthodox Churches in Ukraine?"[16] He gave an unequivocally negative answer to this question, criticizing, among other things, the above-mentioned literary and chronicle testimonies. At the same time, he proposed an explanation for the origin of this myth, pointing to the fact of a direct connection between Orthodox religious rites and the economic activity of Jews through alcohol, which was an inseparable ingredient of Ruthenian religious feasts, and at the same time was supplied by Jews according to the principle of compulsory propination in magnate estates.[17]

In his review of this article, Meir Balaban agreed with the criticism of the evidence for the widespread leasing of Orthodox churches by Jews but

[11] Quote after *Ukrainian Dumy: Editio Minor*, trans. George Tarnawsky and Patricia Kilina (Toronto, 1979), 163, modifying, in line with Zenon Kohut's remarks, the mistakenly used word "merchant" to "leaseholder"; see Kohut, "Khmelnytsky Uprising," 162 n. 45.

[12] Shkandrij, *Jews in Ukrainian Literature*, 17; see also Plokhy, *Cossacks and Religion in Early Modern Ukraine*, 196.

[13] Grabowicz, "The Jewish Theme in Nineteenth-and Early Twentieth-Century Ukrainian Literature," 331.

[14] Kohut, "Khmelnytsky Uprising."

[15] See Brian Horowitz, "Swaying in Three Directions: Ilya Galant in Russian/Ukrainian-Jewish Historiography," *Jewish History* 34 (2021): 361–80.

[16] Ilya Galant, "Arendovali-li evrei tserkvi na Ukraine," *Evreiskaia Starina* 1 (1909): 81–87.

[17] Horowitz, "Swaying in Three Directions," 370.

rejected the way Galant explained the origin of this myth. According to Balaban, there must have been occasional instances of Jews leasing Orthodox churches, which were generalized and spread by insurrectionary songs (dumas), fixing this image in people's imagination.[18] The most direct attack on Galant's arguments was launched by Olena Pchilka (1849–1930), the sister of Mykhailo Drahomanov and mother of the poet Lesya Ukrainka, in the pages of the weekly magazine *Ridnyi Kraj*, which she edited. In her article under the provocative title "History is a Lie!" she accused Galant of attempting to falsify Ukrainian history to justify the Jews. She completely rejected Galant's arguments and his criticism of Cossack chronicles and songs, taking as conclusive proof the isolated contracts already known at the time, which could be interpreted as the leasing of Orthodox churches to Jews, although the documents did not come from Cossack lands, but from other Ruthenian territories.[19]

The discussion among historians on the question of Jews actually leasing Orthodox churches in Ukraine in the seventeenth/eighteenth centuries has stagnated on the positions developed before the First World War. Recently, only Judith Kalik attempted to address this issue on the basis of research in archival sources, stating that this motif arose not so much on the basis of cases of leasing churches, but rather on the basis of "Jewish leases of the lord's rights pertaining to churches situated on the lord's estate(s)," as well as on the basis of instances of the closing of churches in events of the violation of propination rights or tax evasion, which was also a common way Christian officials enforced overdue debts against Jewish synagogues and Orthodox churches.[20]

The "Jews holding the keys to the Orthodox church" controversy was not actually about the past, but lay at the very center of the triangle of national resentments in Ukraine, which had been growing over the course of the nineteenth century and which were founded on historical narratives.[21] This motif served well as an element in the construction of Ukrainian national identity in the second half of the nineteenth century, as it targeted both Jews and Poles and at the same time could easily be used to stimulate moral panic. A "Jew

[18] Majer Bałaban, "H. [*sic*] Galant: Arendowali-li Jewrei prawosławnyje cerkwi na Ukrainie? (Czy dzierżawili żydzi prawosławne cerkwie na Ukrainie?). Jewrejskaja Starina, St. Petersburg. 1909. Tom I. str. 81-87," *Ruś* (1911): 217–19.

[19] Olena Pchilka, "Istorija-brekhnya! (W oboronu tradycji)," *Ridnyj Kraj* 30 (1909), repr. in eadem, *Wykynuti ukrainci: Do zhydivs'ko-ukrains'koji spravy*, ed. Valerij Arkhypov (Kyiv, 2006), 8.

[20] Kalik, "Orthodox Church and the Jews in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth," 232–33.

[21] See John-Paul Himka, "Dimensions of a Triangle: Polish-Ukrainian-Jewish Relations in Austrian Galicia," *Polin* 12 (1999): 25–48.

leasing an Orthodox church" in the days of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was a symbol of the implacable antagonism between the Polish lords and the Ukrainian peasants or Cossacks. In the Ukrainian narrative it was understood as the embodiment of the landlords' contempt—Roman Catholics lords who deprived their Orthodox or Uniate subjects of the possibility to freely celebrate religious rites, making them dependent on paying tribute to the leaseholder, for which position they appointed an "infidel Jew." The Jew, on the other hand, was blamed for serving the Polish lords to the detriment of the Orthodox peasants, so their anger was focused on him.[22] If, therefore, leasing of Orthodox churches to Jews was a common practice, it would provide a simple explanation not only for the emotionally charged relations between Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians at the end of the nineteenth century, but would also explain the anti-Jewish aspect of the Khmelnytsky Uprising and Koliivshchyna rebellion.[23]

The Historical Career of Zelman Wolfowicz

Against the backdrop of building national historiographies and identities in the second half of the nineteenth century, local historians of Drohobych's past unearthed the figure of Zelman Wolfowicz (ca. 1680–1757).[24] His story bore similarities to that of Joseph Süss Oppenheimer, the archetypal "court Jew" from the eighteenth century who became a scapegoat and was executed in Württemberg in 1738, but later became an inspiration for antisemitic discourse.[25] However, Zelman Wolfowicz also had less famous but more proximate counterparts in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, such as Jacob

[22]Gershon Bacon, "The House of Hannover': Gezeirot Tah in Modern Jewish Historical Writing," *Jewish History* 17 (2003): 179–206, at 187.

[23]Kohut, "Khmelnytsky Uprising," 157; Shkandrij, *Jews in Ukrainian Literature*, 18–19; Joel Raba, *Between Remembrance and Denial: The Fate of the Jews in the Wars of the Polish Commonwealth during the Mid-Seventeenth Century as Shown in Contemporary Writings and Historical Research* (New York, 1995), 329–30.

[24]For recent publications on this figure, see Igor Smol'skyj, "Zelman Wolfowich (shtryhy do biografii)," *Drohobyckyj Krayeznavchyj Zbirnyk* 3 (1998): 234–40; Oleh Stetsiuk, "Zelman," *Drahanivski chytannia*, vol. 8 (Drohobych, 2014), 5–18; Zbigniew Jasiewicz, "Pieśń i gra obrzędowa 'Zelman' u Oskara Kolberga i innych. Materiały i interpretacje," *Lud* 101 (2017): 279–303; Tomasz Wiślicz, "Life and Legend of Zelman Wolfowicz," *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów / Jewish History Quarterly* 4 (2020): 741–53; Łukasz Truściński, "Zelman Wolfowicz and the Jewish Community in the System of Power in Drohobycz in the Light of Municipal Records from 1735–1761," *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów / Jewish History Quarterly* 4 (2020): 769–84.

[25]See the latest book on this figure, Yair Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss: The Notorious Trial and Execution of an Eighteenth-Century Court Jew* (Princeton, NJ, 2017).

Becal[26] or Icko Ognisty.[27] A native of Drohobych, according to legend Zelman was of low birth and served as one of the Jewish leaseholders of the saltworks in the Drohobych demesne. Somehow he gained the trust of the Starost of Drohobych, Stanisław Chomętowski, the Great Hetman of the Polish Crown, and his wife Dorota from the Tarło family, who after her husband's death in 1729 became the possessor of the estates.

At the end of the 1720s Zelman Wolfowicz became the official factor of Dorota Tarło, and in 1730 he was elected an elder of the Drohobych kahal for life. He held both these positions—with short breaks—for about a quarter of a century. He was reportedly so powerful that even the noble administrators of the starost's office had to depend on his opinion.[28] Wolfowicz supervised salt production, tax collection, and oversaw local government. Both Christian and Jewish residents of the town accused him of mercilessly extracting money from the inhabitants of the estate, the takeover of various sources of income, and brutality and violence against Jews and Christians alike. The conflict resulted in many years of quarrels, lawsuits brought against him before the royal courts, and eventually also attempts on his life. However, as long as the demesne remained under the rule of Dorota Tarło, nothing could be done with him. Only after she relinquished the starostship in 1755 did the new starost bring Zelman before his court—apparently with the intention of calming the estate inhabitants, who had been living in a state of permanent turmoil and violent conflict between Zelman supported by a group of associates, and the kahal and the townsfolk of Drohobych.

The trial was concluded in one day, and on June 9, 1755 Zelman was sentenced to death for abuse of power, fraud, damaging the estate, and numerous criminal offences, including an attempt to poison the starost Chomętowski (who had died twenty-six years earlier). Nonetheless, at the request of the kahal, the sentence was not executed, and Zelman was imprisoned for life in the town hall. After months of incarceration, he began to plan an escape from prison with the help of some associates, a plan that reportedly involved setting the town on fire for a distraction. However, the conspiracy was exposed, and this time it was decided to carry out the death sentence, from which Zelman saved himself by converting to Catholicism. A few months later, he died a natural death imprisoned in the Carmelite monastery in Drohobych. According to legend, after his death he turned into a vampire and haunted the

[26] See Adam Kaźmierczyk, "Jakub Becal: King Jan III Sobieski's Jewish Factor," *Polin* 15 (2002): 249–66.

[27] See Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov* (Oxford, 2013), 85–93.

[28] The mechanisms of such careers of some Jews under the basis of their relations with magnates are synthetically presented by Magda Teter, *Jews and Heretics in Catholic Poland: A Beleaguered Church in the Post-Reformation Era* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), 32–37.

monks and townspeople at night, for which reason his body was dragged out of his grave and his head cut off and thrown in a swamp.

For the nineteenth-century authors, the municipal archive of Drohobych served as the source of information about Zelman Wolfowicz—mainly its court records from the previous century. It is also possible that over the generations the inhabitants of the town and its surroundings may have passed on some information and gossip about Zelman, which also reached the ears of the authors of the first publications about him. However, the oldest records of such oral traditions that can be dated come from the mid-1860s,[29] while already a decade earlier the first historical publication about him appeared. It therefore cannot be ruled out that oral tales and publications evolved in parallel, under a certain dependence and perhaps inspired each other.

This first publication, which introduced Zelman Wolfowicz into historical circulation, was his death sentence anonymously edited from an archival manuscript and published in one of the Lviv periodicals in 1856.[30] This document, quite sensational in its content, became the most quoted and frequently reprinted source for the story of Zelman's life. From the 1870s, the story of Zelman Wolfowicz began to appear regularly in local historical works published in Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian. In 1896, Franciszek Zych, a history teacher at the high school in Drohobych, published a short monograph on the person.[31] A dozen years later, Meir Balaban published his quasi-literary sketch entitled "Zelman, Mayor of the Drohobycz Kahal," which first appeared in the Lviv illustrated weekly magazine *Nasz Kraj* in 1909, and later also in translations into Hebrew and Yiddish.[32] At the time when Feliks Lachowicz was painting his cycle of pictures from the history of Drohobych, Jakub Wikler, a student of Meir Balaban, was writing his master's thesis, defended in 1936, on the history of Jews in Drohobych up to the fall of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, whose dominant thread was the story of Zelman Wolfowicz.[33]

[29] "Do Borysławia," *Gazeta Narodowa* 211 (1865); Venedikt Ploshchans'kiy, "Korolevskiy vol'nyy Gorod Drogobych, po chasti istorii, topografii i statistiki," *Naukovyy sbornik, izdavayemyy literaturnym obshchestvom Galitsko-russkoy Matitsy* 3 (1867): 162–88, at 172–73.

[30] "Zelman drohobycki," *Przewodnik* 47–49 (1856).

[31] Franciszek Zych, *Zelman Wolfowicz* (Lviv, 1896).

[32] Majer Bałaban, "Zelman, burmistrz kahału w Drohobyczu. Szkic historyczny," *Nasz Kraj* 1–2 (1909).

[33] Jakub Wikler, "Z dziejów Żydów w Drohobyczu (Od roku 1648 do upadku Rzeczypospolitej). Promotor: prof. Majer Bałaban," Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, master's thesis written before 1939, vol. 117/36. It was consulted by Nathan Gelber when he prepared the historical part of Drohobych and Borislav's memorial book, Nathan M. Gelber, "The History of the Jews of Drohobycz," in *Memorial to the Jews of Drohobycz, Boryslaw and Surroundings* [in Hebrew], ed. Nathan M. Gelber (Tel Aviv, 1959); English translation by

For three national historiographies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Zelman Wolfowicz emerged as a substantial confirmation of national narratives—independently Polish, Jewish, and Ukrainian. In all three historiographies, Zelman played the role of the "bad Jew": for the Polish narrative, Zelman's career was the symbol of the political and social crisis that had afflicted the state in the eighteenth century, leading to its collapse; for the Jewish narrative, Zelman personified the internal crisis experienced by the Jewish communities, as their activities faced growing interference from external forces, while individuals of questionable morality ascended to positions of power;[34] finally, for the Ukrainian narrative, Zelman symbolised national oppression by the Polish landlords, who used Jewish agents as their representatives. This was probably why he became a relatively popular figure in the local historiography of the time.

Identification of the Historical Figure with a Folk Character

Although the story of Zelman Wolfowicz's life and career narrated on the basis of historical sources was deplorable and abhorrent enough, he also became charged with holding the key to the church, becoming an emblematic example of this offence as well. Oddly, this resulted from a persistently repeated mistake. As it happened, almost simultaneously with the story of Zelman Wolfowicz, Polish and Ukrainian ethnographers discovered a popular folk ritual song "Goes, goes Zelman," which at the time was recorded mainly in the Subcarpathian Ruthenia, which was the region where Drohobych is located. In accordance with the theoretical principles of the nineteenth-century ethnography, researchers began to look for some kind of historical background for this song (especially, its potentially pre-Christian roots), as well as a mythological explanation.[35]

The song "Goes, goes Zelman" is one of the so-called *haivky*, i.e., songs sung in the springtime, usually recorded in descriptions of folk rituals connected with Easter. The *haivky* attracted the attention of the greatest Polish and Ukrainian ethnographers, including Oskar Kolberg and Volodymyr Hnatiuk,[36] but the oldest publication of the text of this song predates their

Dov Youngerman and Yocheved Klausner, ed. Valerie Schatzker, https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/drohobycz/dro011.html#f11-48.

[34] See Moshe Rosman, "A Minority Views the Majority: Jewish Attitudes towards the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Interaction with Poles," in *From Shtetl to Socialism: Studies from Polin*, ed. by Antony Polonsky (Oxford, 1993), 39–49, at 44–45.

[35] Jasiewicz,"Pieśń i gra obrzędowa 'Zelman' u Oskara Kolberga i innych."

[36] Ibid.; Volodymyr Hnatiuk, "Haivky," *Materialy do ukrainskoji etnolohii* 12 (1909).

research. It appeared as early as 1829 and was published by Franciszek Siarczyński (1758–1829), the first director of the Ossoliński Library in Lviv. He made a brief description of a ritual performed by country girls outside the church on the first day of Easter in the vicinity of Sambor, a town located ca. 30 km west of Drohobych. The description is accompanied by the text of the song performed at that time, which goes as follows:

> 1) Goes, goes Zelman, goes, goes his brother,
> Goes, goes all the Zelman family.
> 2) Why does Zelman go, why does his brother go,
> Why does all the Zelman family go?
> 3) Zelman goes for a maiden, his brother goes for a maiden,
> All the Zelman family goes for a maiden.
> 4) To what land does Zelman go, to what land does his brother go,
> To what land does all the Zelman family go?
> 5) To the Jewish land Zelman, to the Jewish land his brother,
> To the Jewish land all the Zelman family.
> 6) And we do not have a maiden, we will not give her to such a land,
> Go away, all the Zelman family.[37]

In the following strophes, "Jewish land" changes adjective, becoming successively "beggar's land," "gypsy's land," "lord's land," "king's land," etc., until finally the singers agree to give the maiden away. Siarczyński's brief interpretation of this song immediately points to the historical origin of the event it described. In his opinion, this song cannot be traced back to "pagan antiquity" (as expected in post-Ossian ethnography), but to much later times, "when Jews not only leased landed estates, but also church revenues."[38]

The first association of the song's hero with an allegedly real-life historical figure took place a few years later, in the anonymously published information about Zboriv, a town located more than 150 kilometres east of Drohobych. According to the anonymous author, in the seventeenth century, during the reign of King Sigismund III (1587–1632), a Jew by the name of Zelman leased a large number of Ruthenian churches: "At times of baptisms, weddings, and funerals, people were sent to him on horseback, asking for the keys to the church, having first paid the leaseholder as much as he could extort from the supplicants," and this is where the song comes from.[39] Since

[37] [Franciszek Siarczyński] Fr. S., "Opisanie miasta Sambora i obwodu jego: Dzieje dawne miasta tego, i stan niniejszy," *Czasopism naukowy księgozbioru publicznego imienia Ossolińskich* 2 (1829): 50–73, at 69–71.

[38] Ibid., 71.

[39] "Wiadomości o Zborowie," *Czasopismo naukowe od Zakładu Narodowego imienia Ossolińskich wydawane* 6 (1833): 71–72.

that time, ethnographic publications repeatedly stated that the Zelman from the song was "a leaseholder who left for the market, taking the keys from the church with him. He was awaited on the first day of Easter, and when he returned, the people sang the song out of joy."[40] The identification of Zelman from the song with the leaseholder from Drohobych was made for the first time by an anonymous publisher of the above-mentioned oldest edition of historical documents concerning Zelman Wolfowicz from 1856, according to whom the real story was the background for the popular character of Zelman "about whom people still sing songs." He also added that "for a long time, the name of Zelman has been a terror for the local people, and every thief and swindler is still called Zelman in the region of Sambor and Stryi."[41]

This identification was also supported by Izydor Szaraniewicz (1829–1901), an eminent professor of the University of Lviv and a member of the Academy of Arts and Sciences in Kraków, who devoted seven very extensive footnotes to Zelman Wolfowicz in his book on the history of the Orthodox and Uniate clergy's endowments in Ruthenia. He quotes, among other things, a version of the song about Zelman, which ends with the words "Hang Zelman!," which he considers to be "an obvious expression of the people's joy at Zelman being sentenced to death for his criminal acts, which took place in 1755 at the Drohobych district magistrate's court."[42]

However, the most influential item for the identification of Zelman Wolfowicz with the Zelman from the song was a short article entitled "Jud Selman," published in 1892 in German by Raimund Friedrich Kaindl (1866–1930), a historian and folklorist from the University of Chernivtsi, author of fundamental works on the ethnography of the Hutsuls and the German settlement in the Carpathian region. Kaindl based his work on a ritual song about Zelman, which was also recorded in the Hutsul region, and then proceeded to recount the Drohobych tales about a bad leaseholder and his posthumous fate. He associated the origin of the song with historical events, and even though he did not find any characteristic features of the Zelman from the ritual song in the edited historical documents, he unambiguously supported its historical genesis, linking its origin to the figure of Wolfowicz and his attitude to the Ukrainian inhabitants of the demesne. He also explained the appearance of this song in the Hutsul region by the migration

[40] See, for example, "Lublin," *Lwowianin czyli zbiór potrzebnych i użytecznych wiadomości* 5 (1837): 24.

[41] "Zelman drohobycki."

[42] Izydor Szaraniewicz, *Rzut oka na beneficya Kościoła Ruskiego za czasów Rzeczypospolitej polskiej pod względem historyi, a przedewszystkiem o stosunku świeckiego duchowieństwa ruskiego w Galicyi do ziemi w tym okresie* (Lviv, 1875), 55–57.

of peasants from the vicinity of Drohobych.[43] Kaindl's position was soon criticized in a review by Myron Korduba in the journal *Zapysky*, published by the Shevchenko Scientific Society, who questioned his arguments for the identification of a historical figure with the hero of the song.[44] Nonetheless, the Ukrainian translation of Kaindl's article, which appeared in 1896 in the Chernivtsi periodical *Bukovyna*, and Kaindl's authority among the ethnographers of western Ukraine, caused the identification of Zelman Wolfowicz with the Zelman from the song to become widely accepted in Ukrainian folklore studies.

This identification was obviously a result of the commonality of the names of the historical Zelman Wolfowicz and the folkloric figure. However, it was justified, on the one hand, by the conviction, characteristic of ethnography at the time, that folklore could record historical events and pass them on orally for many generations—but, of course, in a distorted form typical for the "folk" aesthetic. On the other hand, this identification served as a proof for the weakly grounded historical thesis about the magnates' leasing of Orthodox churches to Jews in the pre-partition period. The ambiguous lyrics of the song thus began to be interpreted as a complaint about the oppression of the Christian people by the Jewish leaseholder, whose very existence and activity were well documented by historical sources.

It did not take long for this identification to become confirmed by "folk legends," repeated to ethnographers by peasants singing "Zelman" when they were asked about the origin of the song.[45] This reveals the weakness of folklore studies of that time, which assumed that peasant culture was immanently archaic and isolated from the social and cultural life of urban elites. In this case, however, it is extremely difficult to answer the question of whether the identification of the Zelman of the song with the leaseholder from Drohobych was an idea suggested to the peasants by nationally oriented "intermediaries" (village teachers, clergymen, etc.), or an idea spontaneously born among the people in contact with the expanding nation-building myth. What is certain is that this popular identification took place only at the end of the nineteenth century.

[43] Raimund Friedrich Kaindl, "Jud Selman," in idem, *Kleine Studien: Zur Alterthumskunde der Bukowina – Zum Hunneneinfall – Die Lippowaner – Zauberglaube bei den Rutenen – Jud Selman* (Czernowitz, 1893), 40–45.

[44] Myron Korduba, "Naukowa hronika: Rozvidky pro Dra Raimunda Frydryha Kajndla z etnografii ruskoi," *Zapysky Naukovoho Tovarystva imeni Shevchenka* 11 (1896): 4.

[45] Dmitro Vintskovskiy,"Zel'man Vol'fovich," in *Prikarpatskaya Rus'*, vol. 2, ed. Venedikt Ploshchans'kiy (Lviv, 1885), 30–47, at 47.

The Anatomy of the (Intentional) Error

The identification of the two figures had occurred and then persisted in the historical imagination in spite of the fact that, in parallel with its construction, numerous researchers of different specializations provided convincing evidence for its fallacy. Among historians advocating this proposition was Mykhailo Hrushevsky (1866–1934), author of the monumental "History of Ukraine-Rus'" (published in 1898–1937) and first president of the Ukrainian People's Republic in 1917. At the margin of his seminal work, he pointed out the utter lack of historical evidence in this matter.[46] At the time he analyzed the case, historical studies of the figure of Zelman Wolfowicz were based entirely on the records of his 1755 trial, published in 1856 and later republished several times. Meir Balaban was the only historian who used records from two eighteenth-century pinkasim of the Drohobych synagogue; however, detailed analyses of these documents were only conducted by Jakub Wikler in the 1930s, and they were not published until after the Second World War.[47] Regrettably, this is all we know about these documents, as both pinkasim were lost during the war.

It is somewhat surprising, though, that none of the local historians writing about Zelman Wolfowicz in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century made use of Drohobych's well-preserved municipal records, although we know that at least one of them consulted the magistrate's archive.[48] There are many records of Zelman Wolfowicz's habitual activities in the town's documents from 1725 until his sentence of 1755, and many of them attest to his incessant conflicts with the local Christian and Jewish communities.[49] Very important as source material is the register of the so-called castle (or manorial) court in Drohobych, established with the appointment of the new starost, Wacław Rzewuski, and which seems initially to have been intended to resolve conflicts in the demesne over the lawsuit brought in the royal tribunal against Dorota Tarłowa and Zelman Wolfowicz. This register is the only historical source of information on the further turbulent fate of Zelman after the sentence of 1755.[50]

Last, but not least, of great importance are the entries about him recently found in the registers of the district court for nobles in Przemyśl (*sąd*

[46]Mykhailo Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus'*, vol. 8, *The Cossack Age 1626–1650* (Edmonton, 2002), 354 n. 119.

[47]See n. 29 above.

[48]Zych, *Zelman Wolfowicz*, 5.

[49]Central State Historical Archives of Ukraine in Lviv (henceforth CDIAUL), fond 28/1, vol. 7–11.

[50]V. Stefanyk Lviv Scientific Library of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, fond 5/1, vol. 2901/II.

grodzki). They recorded mainly the trials held against Zelman in the royal tribunal, what is all the more valuable since the archive of the royal tribunal was completely destroyed during the Second World War. Among the records from the Przemyśl court registers, one can also find an extremely interesting civil complaint, brought in 1751 against Zelman Wolfowicz by certain Stefan Winnicki, a local nobleman and former administrator of the Drohobych estate, which is actually a comprehensive "criminal biography" of Zelman, collecting all the unfavourable opinions and rumours about him that functioned in both the Christian and Jewish communities of the demesne.[51]

Despite such an increase in the known source base, none of the preserved historical records of Zelman Wolfowicz's activities in the demesne of Drohobycz suggests in the slightest that he was supposed to lease churches or charge any fees for their use. Given that during the trials he was accused of every possible crime, especially those connected with financial exploitation of estate inhabitants, we should expect such allegations not only if he genuinely obstructed the believers' access to their places of worship, but even if only the stereotype of "a Jew holding the keys to the Orthodox church" had currency in the local community at that time. In this respect, nothing has changed since Mykhailo Hrushevsky refuted the identification of the historical Zelman Wolfowicz with the Zelman from the folk song. However, despite the great authority of Hrushevsky in Ukrainian historiography, his opinion has been overlooked or ignored by most authors writing about Zelman in the twentieth century.

It can be argued that Hrushevsky did not devote a separate study to this issue, but merely touched on it in the sidelines of his discussion of wider phenomena. It can be reasoned that the proof "from the silence of sources" alone is insufficient evidence for the historian. It can also be claimed that Hrushevsky did not analyse the ethnographic sources. However, the ethnographic rationale behind identifying Zelman Wolfowicz with the protagonist of the song also proved to be very weak. This was demonstrated by an Ukrainian ethnographer publishing in Polish, Włodzimierz Reszetucha, in his analysis of the text of the song and the symbolism of the ritual, published in 1930.[52] He pointed to the fact that, if we are not persuaded by legends about Zelman Wolfowicz and the historical origin of the song, its text in no way refers to the leasing of a church to the eponymous Zelman, nor to the waiting for the church door to be unlocked. In fact, the anticipated Zelman and his family in the song come to get a maiden, whom they want to take to a foreign "land," i.e., to other estates. Thus, the song is concerned with matchmaking

[51] CDIAUL, fond 13/1, vol. 584, 2453–2478.

[52] Włodzimierz Reszetucha, "O znaczeniu i pochodzeniu haiłki 'Zelman'," *Sprawozdania Towarzystwa Naukowego we Lwowie* 10, no. 1 (1930): 11–14.

or wedding rituals, and not with waiting for the keys to the church. This conclusion is also confirmed by an analysis of the physical games accompanying the performance of this song, which were recreated and classified by Eugeniusz Piasecki. During these games, the participants formed two lines, one of which would symbolise "Zelman and his family." After each of the stanzas of the song, the Zelman party would try to drag one of the girls from the opposite side to their party until they succeeded in bringing all of them. There is not the faintest allusion to waiting for the keys to the locked church.[53]

Against the thesis of the identification of the two Zelmans as one person also worked the "mythological" interpretation, which was popular in ethnography of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. The originator of this interpretation was Bronisław Trentowski (1808–1869), philosopher and creator of a fantastic Slavic mythology that he developed in 1847–1848,[54] and who managed to include in the great *Dictionary of the Polish Language* of 1860 descriptions of Slavic gods that he invented, including a certain "Zelman" as a household deity.[55] At the same time, a mythological interpretation of Zelman also appeared in the Ukrainian humanities, where Omelian Partytskyj (1840–1895), a linguist, pedagogue, and ethnographer, identified in 1867 Zelman from the song with the Old Indian god Soma or with Zelma, the main god of the Thracian tribe of the Getae, described by Herodotus (who called this deity Zalmoksis).[56] As the Getae were said to inhabit, among others, the Transnistrian region, Partytskyj described Zelman as the "supreme god of Galicia and Podolia,"[57] deeming the Easter songs to be the historical remains of his forgotten cult, and the game accompanying them as reminiscences of a pagan sacrificial rite. Although Włodzimierz Reszetucha claimed in 1930 that the evidence of the mythological origin of the Zelman *haivka* can hardly be taken seriously,[58] it still functions on the fringes of ethnography.[59]

[53] Eugeniusz Piasecki, *Dalsze badania nad genezą ćwiczeń cielesnych* (*VIII*)*: Zelman* (Warsaw, 1938).

[54] See Tadeusz Linker, *Słowiańskie bogi i demony: Z rękopisu Bronisława Trentowskiego*, 3rd ed. (Gdańsk, 2018), 12.

[55] See Maurycy Orgelbrand, *Słownik języka polskiego* (Vilnius, 1861), 2193, https://eswil.ijp.pan.pl/index.php.

[56] See Orest Zilynskyj, "Hra na Žalmana a jiné lidové hry o namlouvání nevěsty," in idem, *Vybrani praci z folklorystyki: Do 90-richchia z dnia narozhdennia O. Zilynskoho*, ed. Hanna Skrypnyk and Mykola Mushynka, 2 vols. (Kyiv, 2013), 1:71–109, at 87.

[57] Omelian Partytskyj, "Verhovni bozhestva nashoho krayu," *Dilo* 11, June 14, 1890), https://zbruc.eu/node/37562.

[58] Reszetucha, "O znaczeniu i pochodzeniu haiłki 'Zelman'," 11.

[59] For example, Viktor Davydiuk, "Narodna mifologiya ukrainciv: Pochodzhenia holovnyh personazhiv v svitli paleontolohii," *Narodoznavchi Zoshyty* 1-2 (2010): 94–113; Stanisława

The analyses of the Polish Slavist Antoni Kalina (1846–1906), who studied the occurrence of the motif of Zelman's song in other Slavic countries, went in a different direction. He found structurally and ritually similar folk songs in Russian, Serbian, and Czech folklore. In the Czech version, they had an almost identical text, while their protagonist was called "Žalman." According to his sophisticated etymological argument, the name was supposed to derive from a pre-Slavic word meaning "anthropomorphic sun," rather than from a Jewish male name.[60] The most complete comparative study of this type was presented in 1956 by Orest Zilynskyj (1923–1976), a Czechoslovak literary scholar and folklorist of Lemko origin, who concluded that the song about Zelman originated in the Czech lands during the Middle Ages, probably between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, as part of a courtship or matchmaking ritual. He argued for such an ancient origin of the song because its Czech variant included German words that had ceased to be used before the fifteenth century, while he considered the song itself to stem from the knightly culture that emerged in the Czech lands with German colonization from the thirteenth century onwards. According to Zilynskyj, the evidence for such an old dating of the song was also its far-reaching expansion across the Slavic countries—from Slovenia in the south to Belarus in the north.[61]

From the perspective of the history of Zelman Wolfowicz, all these folkloristic analyses, although debatable on the merits, have the value of unequivocally controverting any connection between this historical character and the origin of the Easter song. Moreover, they also contradict the theory that the song has something to do with the alleged custom of Jews leasing Ukrainian Orthodox churches in the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Ethnographic arguments against the identification of Zelman have been well received by Polish scholars, perhaps thanks to Adam Fischer, who as early as in 1934, describing the ritual game of Zelman, authoritatively stated that "this game obviously has no connection with the Jew Zelman, the alleged leaseholder of church revenues in Rus, because both the game and the name occur in Germanic areas," and considered it to be one of the so-called "imitation games."[62] The opposite situation occurred in Ukrainian ethnography and literary studies, where the claim about the historical genesis of the song

Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska, "Symbolika płodnościowa w polskim folklorze," *Etnolingwistyka* 28 (2016): 207–24, at 217.

[60] Antoni Kalina, Jan Rymarkiewicz, "Appendix lingwistyczny do wiadomości o Sobótce (Z listów Dra Kaliny ze Lwowa do prof. Jana Rymarkiewicza w Poznaniu)," *Warta: Tygodnik poświęcony nauce, rozrywce i wychowaniu* nos. 541–550 (1884).

[61] Zilynskyj, "Hra na Žalmana a jiné lidové hry o namlouvání nevěsty."

[62] Adam Fischer, *Etnografia słowiańska: Polacy* (Lviv, 1934), 249.

“Goes, goes Zelman” in connection with Zelman Wolfowicz and his keeping the keys to the church is still regularly repeated.[63] A significant role here was played by the émigré folklorist Oleksa Voropay (1913–1989), who in his study entitled “Customs of our People,” published in 1958 in Munich, concluded that Zelman was not a symbolic figure, but a historical one—Zelman Wolfowicz, the leaseholder from the estate of Drohobych. This, however, did not prevent him from quoting Polish and Czech variants of the Zelman songs; apparently, he thought that Wolfowicz’s notoriety had reached that far.[64]

Conclusion: What is the Legend about After All?

“The legend was not told in order to transmit history, but rather for the purpose of dealing with a problem vexing the teller’s society,” as Moshe Rosman has rightly noted.[65] Therefore, let us reflect on the message Feliks Lachowicz sought to convey when he created the painting “Goes, goes Zelman” and chose this very subject as one of the best with which to characterize the history of the town of Drohobych. The painting presents a combination of two legends. The first one is the story of Zelman Wolfowicz, a historical figure. According to common knowledge at the time of the painting’s creation, he was supposedly an abusive administrator of the Drohobych estate, who was meted out a well-deserved punishment. However, we do not know whether his legend took root already in his lifetime or arose following his death. We can guess that the turbulent story of his life was retold in the town for decades, but the earliest dateable source for his legend is the anonymous publication from 1856.[66] From the outset, we were presented with a ready-made historiographical product—a relatively accurate source edition of the trial record that resulted in Zelman Wolfowicz’s death sentence. This case protocol was rather peculiar because it consisted of an indictment summarily followed by a verdict, while the defendant was not given an opportunity to speak at all. Nonetheless, this document defined interpretations of Zelman’s figure in historical narratives for decades. Furthermore, the published version of the trial record was preceded by three brief sentences of commentary, which suggested that the historical Zelman was actually the protagonist of folk songs

[63] One of the newest examples is Illia Chedoluma, “Images and Representations of the Rudnytskyi Family: The Case of Ukrainians in Galicia Between the Wars,” *Scripta Judaica Cracoviensia* 18 (2020): 49–66, at 55.

[64] Oleksa Voropay, *Zvychai nashoho narodu: Etnohrafichnyj narys*, 2 vols. (Munich, 1958), 1:223.

[65] Moshe Rosman, *How Jewish is Jewish History?* (Oxford, 2007): 159.

[66] “Zelman drohobycki.”

being sung in the surrounding areas. This leads us down the ethnographic path and points to folklore as a potential source for completing the portrayal of Zelman Wolfowicz.

Meanwhile, the local population, predominantly of the Greek-Catholic denomination, used to sing on Easter an obscure, highly formalized song in front of the churches, in which the name "Zelman" (perceived as a popular Jewish male name) was repeated many times. Could it be, then, that this was a reference to Zelman Wolfowicz? The ethnographical assumption of the time that folklore could recall and transmit between generations the memory of historical events fully justified this hypothesis; it led scholars to ignore the evidence that the same song was sung by people in the Hutsul Region, or eastern Poland, and even in Belarus and the Czech lands, which are located hundreds of kilometres away. This phenomenon could always be explained by the spread of the motif.

What was still missing, however, was the binding agent that would connect the story of Zelman Wolfowicz with a rather insignificant folk song—because what could a Jew have to do with an Orthodox church? In mid-nineteenth-century Ukraine, the answer was simple: he probably was leasing it and charged a fee for unlocking it for religious purposes. This motif was already firmly established in the historical imagination of both the Ukrainian elite and the people, thanks to songs about Cossack insurrections that had been passed down since the eighteenth century and the works of historians and journalists. Nevertheless, it was challenging to prove that the leasing of churches by Jews actually happened and was indeed widespread enough to have influenced the general attitudes of Orthodox Christians towards Jews. Zelman Wolfowicz, for his part, was a perfect fit as confirmation of this thesis, with his notoriousness, alleged abuses, and the song performed by the people at the church's entrance forming a seemingly logical whole. Neither the lack of historical evidence, nor the ethnographic analysis of the lyrics of the song and the accompanying ritual play, which contradicted this association, prevented it from becoming firmly established in mainstream narrative. The strength of the legend lies in the fact that, on the one hand, it refers to facts recognized as historical, and on the other hand, it presents itself as a true description of the past.[67] And since its authority is based on social convictions, therefore it fits into a network of not so much knowledge, but beliefs, including prejudices and stereotypes. Thus, Zelman Wolfowicz was situated at the intersection of two antisemitic stereotypes: the image of a Jew exploiting his undue authority to amass riches at the cost of Christians, and the other stereotype—particularly prevalent in Ukrainian territories—of the

[67] See Haya Bar-Itzhak, *Jewish Poland: Legends of Origin; Ethnopoetics and Legendary Chronicles* (Detroit, 2001), 14–15.

Jew holding the keys to the church. In the context of nation-building fervour at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the symbolic power of the Zelman Wolfowicz legend as a Jew who leased an Orthodox church grew so intense that it overrode the inconsistencies and fallacies that were exposed by some scholars.

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