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## Latin in the contemporary Polish "street epigraphy"

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## Latin in the Contemporary Polish “Street Epigraphy”\*

**Abstract:** The contemporary graffiti-phenomenon has become a subject of intensive research. Within this scope of interest Latin graffiti, more widely understood as “street epigraphy,” has not been focused on in particular. The present essay offers a preliminary study of such inscriptions (including graffiti, tattoos, labels, advertisements). They usually exploit recurrent quotations, often cited with grammatical errors. The inscriptions as such belong to a wider stock of popular culture.

**Key words:** Latin, epigraphy, street epigraphy, reception, tattoos, graffiti, labels

### Introduction

The language of the ancient Romans is inseparably associated with the epigraphic evidence. In Poland, from the Middle Ages up to the end of the 18th century, Latin epitaphs and other inscriptions outnumbered the ones incised in Polish language. However, over time Latin nearly completely disappeared from Polish epigraphy. This process is still waiting for a proper scientific treatment. Classical Greek language always played a marginal role in Polish epigraphy (but one can find some interesting cases<sup>1</sup>).

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\* The present contribution was written before a Facebook group *Investigatores Inscriptionum* (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/investigatores.inscriptionum>) has been founded. This is why I have not exploited the data collected by the group.

<sup>1</sup> For example, T. Derda, A. Łajtar: “Epigrafik grecki na Powązkach: epitafium księcia Georgiosa Muruzisa (1804–1931).” In: *Timai: studia poświęcone profesorowi Włodzimierzowi Lengau-*

Our times are not so familiar with Latin language, unless we take into consideration so-called *lacina podwórkowa*.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, from time to time we might be pleasantly surprised and meet bits of Cicero's language. The present article is dedicated to such fragments.

To start with, I owe the readers a few words of explanation for using a rather unusual term "street epigraphy." Epigraphic evidence covers a vivid variety of inscriptions, from *Res gestae Divi Augusti* through church epitaphs and graves to mere latrine writings. All definitions of epigraphy have their inaccuracies, especially when one tries to resolve the fundamental problem: What is the subject of epigraphy as a historical discipline? Simple "inscriptions" does not explain anything. Polish language offers a very convenient division between *inskrypcja* (inscription) and *napis* (more or less: lettering). In my opinion, the true subject of epigraphy is *napis* – all written media not intended to be preserved in libraries and archives: inscriptions in their proper meaning (lettering incised, cut or cast in a hard material), texts embroidered, painted, printed, written with ink or with any other material on any stuff (carrier), even paper (leaflets, handbills, posters) can be called altogether epigraphs. In my view, an epigrapher is a scholar investigating into the realm of such epigraphs.<sup>3</sup>

So the present contribution deals with the epigraphs operating within the street – an artificial channel for translocation and communication. For centuries, streets are full of various epigraphs – graffiti, posters, signboards, banners, swing signs, and texts literally carried by people (on garments, tattoos, bags) and their vehicles. All of them are thought to make publicly known sentiments, beliefs, offers, views; to reach the widest possible audience. Some of the epigraphs carried by humans are not destined to be widely known (jewellery, some tattoos, medals, personal weapon, buttons) and I have discarded them. Another ignored category are street epigraphs created by an official body – in Poland Latin or Greek sentences embellish usually buildings of libraries, schools, courts, churches, departments.<sup>4</sup> For obvious reasons I also excluded sepulchral inscriptions – they operate in a different sphere. I am interested in epigraphs made by common people, by producers of daily goods and services, that can be seen as manifestations of the popular culture (but if an official or quasi-official body exploits this

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erowi przez uczniów i młodszych kolegów z okazji Jego 60. urodzin. Ed. A. Wołicki. Warszawa 2009, pp. 48–56.

<sup>2</sup> Literally 'backyard Latin' – in this phrase the word *Latin* is used in a similar meaning that the word *French* in English "pardon my French." In both the cases obscene words are seemingly borrowed from a foreign language.

<sup>3</sup> Piotr Kowalski labelled all short notes – from graffiti on walls to entries in memorial books – as "inscriptions," so he based it on literal meaning of a word *inscribo* – 'I write in'; see P. Kowalski: *Samotność i wspólnota: inskrypcje w przestrzeniach współczesnego życia*. Opole 1993.

<sup>4</sup> See for example: *Regulae iuris: lacińskie inskrypcje na kolumnach Sądu Najwyższego Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*. Ed. W. Wołodkiewicz. Warszawa 2006.

methods of spreading their information I incorporate the epigraphs produced by such bodies). The epigraphs analysed below are usually placed within the space of translocation: streets, backyards, inner corridors of public and private buildings. I have collected the material mostly in Lublin (graffiti), some I found in other Polish cities; the Internet is a rich source of tattoos (especially a website [www.naszetatuaze.pl](http://www.naszetatuaze.pl)) and garments.

The main problem connected with the material defined in such a way is that you meet it unexpectedly on your way home, while shopping, commuting, traveling. In many cases there are no chances to make a picture of it, and when you have this rare possibility the only camera you have at your disposal is a mobile phone. Many of street epigraphs are ephemeral. Some graffiti I have dared to record but some I have just seen (both I labeled with *vidi*), and about some of them I have been informed.

In 2011 while visiting Belgrade I came across a familiar phrase: *Festina lente*, written on a front door of a house (Kosančićev Venac 17; *vidi*). This ancient citation<sup>5</sup> can serve as a motto for every tourist. Back in Poland I started to search for similar texts written on walls, then I broadened the scope of my investigation into T-shirts, tattoos, signboards, etc. The collection of such epigraphs is not rich, but still enables preliminary research.

From the very beginning of the written culture, graffiti is a pivotal branch of literary activity. Graffiti cover an extremely wide range of topics and aims, from confirming one’s presence to stating political ideas. Modern popular culture raised the status of graffiti very high, granting them even a label of “art.” Nevertheless for many of us a graffiti is rather an act of vandalism that disturbs the neatness of our streets and environment. For a historian it is a crucial evidence. From time to time, Polish graffiti offers a grain of Latin.

## Graffiti

Let me start with a graffiti suitable for every beginning of scientific work: QUO VADIS KOLEŚ? ‘Quo vadis buddy?’ (Fig. 1).

It is an example of an old tradition: joining of Polish words or syntax with Latin.<sup>6</sup> A quoted phrase *Quo vadis?* has been already deeply rooted in Polish language and it is reasonable to regard it not as Latin but in fact Polish (although of an foreign genesis). What is worth stressing is a creative development of the meaning

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Suet., *Div. Aug.* 25 lhm.

<sup>6</sup> Another examples of this phenomenon are *fugas chrustas* or charming *Ad mortem us-randum*.

of the phrase. Streets of Polish cities usually offer less original Latin graffiti. These are mostly sentences. *Per aspera ad astra venit*<sup>7</sup> (Lublin, Dolna 3 Maja street, Fig. 2; *vidi*) is still modified, but *Pro publico bono* (Tarnobrzeg, *vidi* – the graffiti already disappeared), *Volenti non fit iniuria* (Katowice, viaduct, Kochanowskiego street, Fig. 4; *vidi*), *Faciant meliora potentes* (Katowice, kind information given by Professor Sapota), *Cui bono* (Katowice, information given) are widely known phrases. It is almost impossible to determine who and why made them. But from time to time the author can be detected. In January 2013 someone “decorated” a wall of the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University with a thrilling confession: *Mors amica mea est* (Lublin, M. Curie-Skłodowskiej Square, Fig. 5; *vidi*). The same hand wrote directly by the side of the above graffiti ANTIFA that suggests that the author has a leftist worldview. Both graffiti were cleaned up within two days after they appeared. Interesting cases I dared to record in 2010 in Lublin: someone directly above the entrance to the Lublin Plaza shopping centre sprayed ungrammatical but thought-provoking sentence: *Ad mortem defecatum* (Lublin, Obrońców Pokoju street, Fig. 3; *vidi*). Is it a concise summary of present-day overconsumptive culture? I have also got information about wall-graffiti *Vide cul fide*, but I have not verified it.

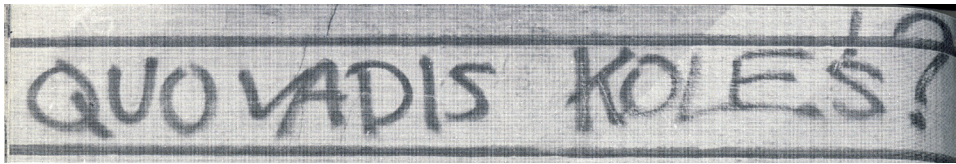


Fig. 1. Source: *Graffiti: sztuka czy wandalizm*. Toruń 1991, s.n.



Fig. 2. Phot. by P. Madejski



Fig. 3. Phot. by P. Madejski

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Sen., *Her. furens* 441: *Non est ad astra mollis et terris via*.



Fig. 4. Phot. by P. Madejski



Fig. 5. Phot. by P. Madejski

There exists a group of graffiti connected with a very particular social group – football fans. Numerous Polish sport clubs, and especially football associations, bear Latin or Latinized names (e.g. Legia, Cracovia, Silesia, Gedania, Jagiellonia, Resovia, Polonia, Amica, Krzczonovia, Sandecja). I do not attempt to connect this fact with a very common graffiti of Polish streets: *Ave* + a name of a club (e.g. *Ave Silesia*,<sup>8</sup> *Ave Motor*, *Ave Górnik* etc. – Fig. 6).

What is more interesting, I have not recorded any case of *Vae* + a name of a club. *Ave* is usually joined with football clubs, but occasionally is also a companion of other “organizations,” for example *AVE BMH*<sup>9</sup> (Lublin, Północna street; *vidi*). So, as in the *quo vadis* case, *ave* already can be regarded as a Polish phrase. The same is true for *versus* – this word is surely derived directly not from Latin, but from English.<sup>10</sup> Football fans include Latin or quasi-Latin words creating more puzzling sentences, obscure to the profanes – POM-PEJSZON AVE MOTOR (written with chalk, Lublin, Pl. M. Curie-Skłodowskiej;

<sup>8</sup> This is also a name of Silesia Wrocław fan club, see: <http://www.wielkislask.pl>.

<sup>9</sup> BMH – Bractwo Marihuany i Haszyszu/Brotherhood of Marihuana and Hashish.

<sup>10</sup> English should be seen now as the most important and the most stimulating source of Latin loan-words in the present-day Polish language.

*vidi*). The fans also like some translated quotations derived from the classical Latin literature. The most popular are Caligula's words *Niech nienawidzą byle się bali*<sup>11</sup> and *Mnie wolno wszystko i w stosunku do wszystkich*<sup>12</sup> (fig. 7). Similar sentiments can be also presented using different media and without risking any penal responsibility: on T-shirts and generally garment, or as tattoos.



Fig. 6. Łęczna, Braci Wójcickich Street, Phot. by P. Madejski

Inside public buildings a discerning eye helps in noticing Latin among colourful mass of epigraphs. For example a student of history at the UMCS has written with a ball-pen on a wall the initial words of the famous Wladislaus Herman's document for Bamberg cathedral: *notum sit omnibus in Xp(ist)o fidelib(us)* – the author even used a Carolingian minuscule document scripture (the new Humanities Faculty building, room 321; *vidi*). More creative are students of the Catholic University of Lublin. Someone, probably slightly frustrated, has written on an armchair offensive *Canis tibi faciem lingeat* (the main building, 2nd floor, by the Dean Office; *vidi*) or *Carpe the fucking diem!* (the main building, 3rd floor, room 370, Fig. 8; *vidi*).

<sup>11</sup> Accius (*Trag. Rom. frag.*, p. 187 Ribbeck) apud Cic., *Phil.* I 14, 34; *Sest.*, 48, 102; *off.* I 28, 94; *Sen.*, *ira* I 20, 4; *Suet.*, *Cal.* 30. Such graffiti I have noticed in Lublin at the Lipowa Street-Sądowa Street crossroads (the epigraph already disappeared) and in Łęczna (Matki Boskiej Fatimskiej Street – unfinished, but still visible).

<sup>12</sup> *Graffiti: sztuka czy wandalizm*. Toruń 1991, s.n.; cf. *Suet.*, *Cal.* 29.



Fig. 7. Source: *Graffiti: sztuka czy wandalizm*. Toruń 1991, s.n.





Fig. 8. Phot. by P. Madejski

Another student, this time from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, wrote above a wash-stand in WC *Manus manum lavat* – a very suitable sentence when we take the context into consideration. It is of course a humble collection of student graffiti, but I think students of history and classical philology can be seen as a prolific Latin graffiti-makers. Unfortunately their creative activity cannot survive a cleaner's cloth or holidays renovations.

## Tattoos

Tattooing had been originally associated in Poland with jail-culture and convicts (not to mention Nazi concentration camps).<sup>13</sup> The last two decades witnessed a triumphal advance of tattooing from the social margin into mainstream and open presentation. Now proud tattoo-owners show their adornments to the others without causing scandal in a public place. Usually such tattoos are placed on arms, necks, shoulders, legs, backs, cleavages, fingers. Limited space induces tattoo-lovers to prefer short sentences and phrases.

Probably the practice of using Latin phrases in tattoos has its roots in the jail culture. Latin offered a member of such subculture certain advantages – it is not

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<sup>13</sup> S. Przybyliński: *Dziara, cynkówka, kolka: zjawisko tatuażu więziennego*. Kraków 2007; M. Snopek: *Tatuaż: element współczesnej kultury*. Toruń 2010.

widely known, concise, and mysterious. It suits well someone who tries to stand apart. In a prison context a humanistic manifesto *Homo sum* gains a brand new meaning – it declares that its owner is a full member of the subculture (the man).<sup>14</sup> Such sentences also deals with values especially highly rated among members of the prison or criminal subsociety: loyalty (*Vide cul fide, Homo homini lupus*), manliness and immovability (*Cave ne cadas, Niech nienawidzą byle się bali*).<sup>15</sup> Some signify specialization or a rank (*Dux, Erit* – a thief),<sup>16</sup> another stress a demonic character of the owner (*Saceros [sic!] Christi, tu scis me esse diabolum! Cur me derogabis?* or its translation<sup>17</sup>), or their life philosophy (*Memento mori, Alea iacta est* in a erroneous form *Alea asta este*<sup>18</sup>). What is worth noting is a phenomenon of joining the knowledge of the correct meaning of the sentence with their erroneous writing (cf. above *Vide cul fide, Saceros, Alea asta este*). This clearly indicates that the meaning is more important than a correct written form.

Not only criminal subcultures use Latin tattoos. This phenomenon, as it was already stated, entered into popular culture. A brief survey of photos published on [www.naszetatuaze.pl](http://www.naszetatuaze.pl) indicates that most of this website users made Latin tattoos influenced by the current fashion. Recurrence of worn out sentences or phrases, like *Semper fidelis, Gloria victis, Carpe diem* is the proof of the above conclusion. Men’s Latin tattoos usually are connected with loyalty, friendship, work and toil (*Vivere militare est, Dum spiro spero, Consensus facit legem, Quod me non necaverit certe confirmabit, Alteri vivas oportet si vis tibi vivere, Fata viam invenient, Amat victoria curam, Faber est suae quisque fortunae, Amicum proba probatum ama*, and *Vide cul fide* or its variations as well), while women prefer proverbs and quotations on love or sentiments (Virgilian<sup>19</sup> *Amor omnia vincit*, but more original Ovidian *ut ameris amabilis esto*,<sup>20</sup> Senecan *Animus est qui divites facit*, and sincere confession – *Anima vilis*). There are some unique texts as well: Ovidian<sup>21</sup> *Nitimur in vetitum sempex [sic!] cupimusque negate*, and a special tattoo-epitaph: *Memini tui, pater; memento mei... / Ryszard / 24. 10. 1956 ~ 10. 02. 2012*. In the last case grammatical correctness is worth stressing. But, just as in the cases of the jail tattooing, the meaning is more important than the grammatical or lexical correctness.

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<sup>14</sup> M. Snopek: *Tatuaż...*, p. 217.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 218–220.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 218, 275.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 270.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 239, 241.

<sup>19</sup> *Ecl. X* 69.

<sup>20</sup> *Ars amat. II* 107–108.

<sup>21</sup> *Amores III* 4, 17.

## Garments

Garment epigraphs usually echo aims and schemas of the discussed tattoo epigraphs. Football fans wear T-shirts or blouses with *Vide cul fide (vidi)*,<sup>22</sup> more liberally or even anarchistic oriented – with *Custodia legis revolutio*. There is also a group of so-called patriotic T-shirts with proper sentences – for example a firm Koszulki historyczne (Historical T-shirts),<sup>23</sup> owned by a historian Michał Janik, offers pieces with *Memento mori*, *Credo in unum Deum*, *Fortuna variabilis*, *Deus mirabilis*, *Equus Polonus sum et magis estimans libertatem quam vitae*. I was informed by Mr. Janik that these T-shirts were not too popular. It is understandable – the sentences they carry are too original, unparalleled and untypical.

Endo offers garments for children and adorns them with humorous pictures with Latin-Polish subscriptions, for example *Carpe diem! Używaj życia! Chwytaj dzień! Unikaj tycia!*, druga *Festina lente to słowa święte lub jako kto woli śpiesz się powoli* oraz *Tempus fugit... Czas ucieka... I przez palce mi przecieka... Ale często myślę sobie, że coś kiedyś jeszcze zrobię... .*<sup>24</sup>

Of course cloth epigraphs can inform about beliefs and preferences. For example a blouse with *DEUS HONOS LABOR* (sometimes together with a suitable picture; *vidi*) is a clear statement of one's life philosophy. More religious persons put on their robes prayers or exorcisms – *CRUX SACRA SIT MIHI LUX NON DRACO SIT MIHI DUX Vade retro Satana, numquam suade mihi vana. Sunt mala quae libas, ipse venena bibas* (Fig. 9; *vidi*).<sup>25</sup> Prayers are also popular among gothic rock lovers (like the one against the Normans *A furore normanorum libera nos domine summa pia gratia nostra conservando corpora ett [sic!] custodia de gente fera normannica nos libera quae nostra vastat deus regna; vidi*).

<sup>22</sup> Numerous firms sell garments with this lettering.

<sup>23</sup> Source: <http://koszulki-historyczne.spreadshirt.pl/> (accessed 14.2.2013).

<sup>24</sup> The author of the texts is Małgorzata Strzałkowska, <http://endo.pl/kategoria/60-swiaty-endo/linia/213-dinozaury.html> (accessed 14.2.2013).

<sup>25</sup> It is a quotation from a very popular Catholic sacramental medal – so-called the Saint Benedict medal.

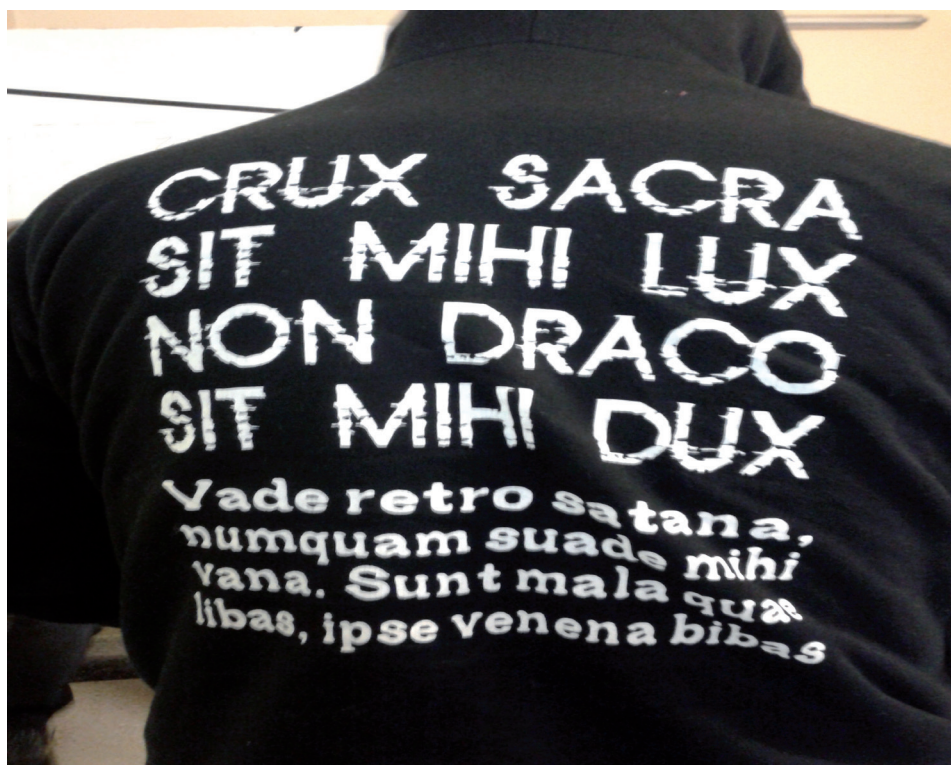


Fig. 9. Phot. by P. Madejski

## Trade and services

Numerous Polish firms carry Latin or quasi-Latin names. This is especially common among undertakers and other funeral enterprises (e.g. Resurrexit, Exodus, Animus, Ubi sunt, Sepultura, Coelum, Auxilium, Pro morte, Sacrum, Pro memoria, Concordia, Credo, Requiem, Memento mori, Angelus, Memento),<sup>26</sup> but proper names are much more popular (Charon, Hades, Eden, Elisium, Atena, Aaron, Abel).<sup>27</sup> Security firms like Latin or Latinized names as well (Civis, Juventus, Expertus, Securitas, Amicus, Compertus). It is also a widespread practice in medical and legal services, from time to time even an ordinary workshop can bear a noble Latin name (Caliga – a shoemaker in Poznań; Exodus – a building materials store in Zwoleń or an abattoir in Trzciana). Such

<sup>26</sup> See: <http://www.firmypogrzebowe.info/> (accessed 9.9.2013).

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem.

nomenclature is important because it is usually repeated on sign-boards within streets.

Some firms make a more sophisticated use of Latin. Fortuna Brewery from Miłosławiec uses a Virgilian<sup>28</sup> sentence *Audaces fortuna iuvat* as its official motto, placed on labels, beer glasses, caps. Also Piotrków Trybunalski brewery Sulimar enriched its labels with a motto: *Ubi concordia ibi victoria (vidi)*. Quite different attitude towards Latin showed a clothing firm Reporter that put on its carrier bags “press clips” in Latin, but they were just an odd collection of unrelated Latin words. Latin and the classical connotation exploited also a mobile phone operator Polkomtel S.A. during the “Simplus Maximus” campaign.<sup>29</sup> Latin name *Alter ego* bears also one club in Szczecin, and this phrase sprayed on walls serves as an advertisement of the club (Szczecin 2013, *vidi*).

## Sticker art

Although stickers (Polish *wlepki* or *vlepki*) are not normally linked to the epigraphy as a science, they have much in common with epigraphs. It is a form of communication and its message is publicly displayed usually by individuals or informal groups, not authorities. Of course it does not exclude a situation when a political group or even a party uses sticker to propagate their programmes and ideas. Some of such groups from time to time exploit Latin. For example Młodzież Wszechpolska (All-Polish Youth) takes the advantage of stickers with its sign and *Imperium Polonicum* legend, Narodowa Rewolucja Fans put *Amor patriae nostra lex* on their stickers and logos.

## Greek

Classical or modern Greek languages are almost absent from the evidence. I have recorded just one case – in Katowice. Probably the same hand which executed above-mentioned graffiti *Volenti non fit iniuria* also sprayed another one on the same wall ζο το ιεστ (that is *βοτ ισ δις*; Fig. 10, *vidi*) and a big quotation mark with οχ. It is of course a joke, but still its author showed a certain knowledge of Greek.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Aen.* X 284.

<sup>29</sup> Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GIYuLvxCsg> (accessed 9.9.2013).



Fig. 10. Phot. by P. Madejski

## Conclusions

Contemporary Polish “street epigraphy” exploits numerous forms of expression and Latin appears on every field, even though it covers a marginal part of the phenomenon as a whole. Some conclusions can be drawn even based on the humble collection of sources described above. First the most popular expression of Latin are sentences – well known, safe, and concise. Nobody needs to know Latin to understand them. The case of *Vide cul fide* clearly shows that this knowledge is not even expected (but this mistaken form can be labelled as a mind virus – it is already present in songs<sup>30</sup>).

More interesting is the sociological perspective. Latin almost disappeared from primary schools, and it is practically non present at higher levels of education, so it is clear that not many of contemporary Poles are able to read and under-

<sup>30</sup> See M&L Crew song: [http://www.tekstowo.pl/piosenka,m\\_l\\_crew,vide\\_cul\\_fide.html](http://www.tekstowo.pl/piosenka,m_l_crew,vide_cul_fide.html); <http://pobierajmp3.pl/mp3/2204404/mampl-crew-vide-cul-fide> (accessed 19.2.2013).

stand the language. But there exist groups that clearly prefer some Latin elements in their activity. First, football fans: they use sentences stressing loyalty, manliness, patriotism, and violence. Sometimes they try to do something more – for example a KS Cracovia fan proposed to use a sentence *Hic sunt Cracoviae cordis* [sic!] as a legend joined to the club logo.<sup>31</sup> Similar words or quotations appeared in jail tattoos. Also nationalist organizations use Latin phrases, not alien to their leftist or anarchist<sup>32</sup> opponents either. Creative manifestation of Latin are rather rare. There are also visible preferences resulting from sex (women are more inclined toward emotional subjects).

So why Latin is used in such social contexts? I can propose one explanation. It is obvious that the inner essence of the cited sentences expresses values and virtues especially appreciated within a given group; values that positively influence cooperation within the group and its cohesion. These aims are additionally consolidated by a mysterious, exclusive character of the language itself. Both these factors should unite members of a group. Latin serves as a kind of a token of recognition. Unfortunately, it does not presume that any knowledge or learning of the language is expected. The phenomenon indicated in the present contribution still needs research, and, what is more important, constant observation and recording.

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<sup>31</sup> Source: <http://www.cracovia.krakow.pl/read.php?13,1652415,page=10> (accessed 9.9.2013).

<sup>32</sup> During elections anarchists eagerly use a quotation from Gospel: *Wiatr wieje tam gdzie chce* (John 3, 7). I have recoded such graffiti on the UMCS walls.