

## The project of the Dragon Trail as an alternative thematic route in the context of Kraków's heritage management and the city's iconosphere

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**Elżbieta Wiacek**

*elzbieta.wiacek@uj.edu.pl*

*Uniwersytet Jagielloński*

*Instytut Studiów Międzykulturowych*

*<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3148-4549>*

### Abstract

This study explores the implementation and significance of the new community project the Dragon Trail in Kraków. The trail was the initiative of the city's residents. Despite support from the local community, the original version of the new route did not get approval from the Provincial Office for the Protection of Monuments, which opposed the project's location as inconsistent with the city's policies. This article examines the reason for these controversies in the context of management of Kraków's heritage, and the project development despite encountering obstacles. A mixed-methods approach was used including qualitative data from desk research and participant observation. The preliminary results of the research, show that The Dragons Trail offers one more thematic route attracting both the residents of Kraków and tourists. Following the trail, all visitors can see many less popular but interesting places outside of must-see spots and learn about the local history.

**Keywords:** the Dragon Trail, Kraków, heritage, iconosphere, thematic route

“[...] there is something in the dragon's image that fits man's imagination, and this accounts for the dragon's appearance in different places and periods” [Borges, Guerrero 1969, p. 13].

### Introduction

In September 2023, Kraków – one of the oldest cities in Poland, a former state capital<sup>1</sup>, and today a metropolis, celebrated the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the inscription of its historical center on the UNESCO World Heritage List. In September 1978, during its first meeting, the World Heritage Committee placed the Historic Center of Kraków on the list of sites of special significance for world heritage [Kraków.pl 2024]. The area included the urban layout of Cracow's Old Town (from 1257) together with the districts of Stradom and Kazimierz (from 1335), as well as Wawel Hill [UNESCO 2024]. According to the Committee's decision, “It is one of the most outstanding examples of European urban planning, characterized by the harmonious development

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<sup>1</sup> Kraków was a capital of Poland between 11<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century.

and accumulation of features representing all architectural styles from the early Romanesque to the Modernist periods” [UNESCO 2024a]. Consequently, the built environment of Wawel Hill and the urban layouts of the medieval towns of Kraków and Kazimierz are inscribed in the National Heritage Register and protected by the law and the city’s strategic policy documents. Back in 1978, Kraków was the only European city on this list.

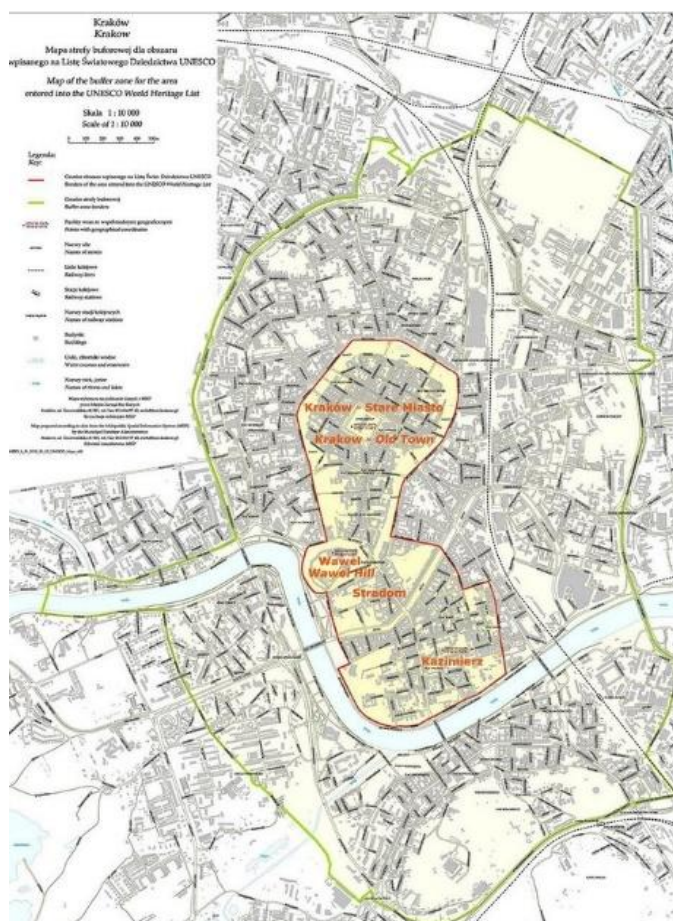


Figure 1. Centre of Kraków – UNESCO protected area from 1978 (marked with orange line) and its extension – the buffer zone from 2010 (marked with green line)

Source: UNESCO, 2024b, public domain

Kraków’s history features periods of prosperity and decline. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, after the third partition of Poland in 1795, Kraków became a distant backwater to the Austrian Empire [Gyurkovich, Gyurkovich 2021, p. 418]. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Kraków was labeled a fortress city – *Festung Krakau* – of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The outline of the fortress’s core determined Kraków’s spatial development up to the first years of the twentieth century. In 2010, this area (which corresponds to the size of the city’s urban area towards the end of the nineteenth century) was also added to the UNESCO World Heritage List

as a buffer zone [Porębska et al 2019]. A communal monument preservation program encompassing the entire city defines the conditions for managing the World Heritage property [UNESCO 2024b]. The World Heritage Committee's decisions impacted local authorities' approach to the heritage. The article will examine this influence by analyzing the controversy around implementing the new tourist attraction in Kraków – The Dragon Trail.

In contemporary research on the structure of a city, one of the key concepts is the experience of space and place. The now classic distinction defined by Yi-Fu Tuan separates anonymous and abstract space from an individually marked place read by understandable semantic codes. Yi-Fu Tuan, a representative of humanistic geography, defined this difference as follows: "Space is open, suggests the future and encourages action... A closed and humanized space becomes a place..." [Tuan 1987, p. 16]. This understanding of space introduces the category of experiencing a place – a multi-aspect connection between the people and a place. In this article, attention will be focused on the relationship between the tourist and the city.

The city has always been composed of two organically related, autonomous interacting subsystems: urban and social [Wallis 1990]. The iconosphere is the third element – a carrier of values, and resources of historical and cultural content. "Iconosphere" is a term introduced by the art historian Mieczysław Porębski to designate the universe of images of all kinds surrounding man [Porębski 1972]. According to him, the iconosphere includes images both those that are created before our eyes and those that were created earlier. The iconosphere is then the whole visual information reaching people at every moment. Such a broadly defined iconosphere includes natural landscapes, buildings, industrial design, fashion, and pop culture. Porębski emphasized that every image, regardless of the time of its creation, is a "state of affairs" that affects observers capable of selecting, classifying, and remembering these impacts. In the observer's memory, the image becomes an event that can have multiple impacts [Poprzęcka 2013]. Along with the development of technology in the twentieth century, there was a rapid increase in the production of images. They have become an inseparable component of the landscape both as its elements (e.g. large-format advertisements) and as a determinant of perception of landscapes (e.g. tourist photography). The landscape therefore offers a frame for the iconosphere, as well as being its product.

The iconosphere of Kraków has a strong symbolic dimension. For centuries the Wawel Dragon has been one of the main Kraków's symbols and an integral part of the city's iconosphere. The story of the Dragon and its representations have always been associated with the historical center of Kraków. Dragons belong to the iconic domain of Kraków: a symbol recognized and close to the hearts of inhabitants and tourists alike. They are also important in the cultural life of Kraków. Significant outdoor spectacles include the Great Dragon Parade, which has been organized since 2000 by the Groteska Theater. This article aims to explore the implementation and significance of the new community project the Dragon Trail in Kraków. The idea of the project and its implementation have not yet been published in scientific studies. I would argue that the currently implemented thematic route is an interesting example of a symbolization process and enriches the offer of existing thematic routes in Kraków, especially in the context of a new trend: off-the-beaten-track tourism.

### **Methods of research**

The spatial scope of the study encompasses the city of Kraków. Particular attention was paid to the project The Dragon Trail and its reception which spans from 2020 to September 2024. The study objectives are:

- to describe the idea of the Dragon Trail project and the circumstances of its origin,
- to investigate the reason for controversy around implementing the new thematic route in Kraków,
- to examine the benefits of the project, especially in the context of the concentration of tourist traffic in the city center.

This study aimed to address the following research questions:

- what kind of places were chosen as a location for the Dragon Trail, and what is their significance?
- does the symbol of a dragon used in the new thematic route carry the same meaning as in the previous centuries?
- how do the inhabitants of Kraków and tourists respond to the new material manifestation of dragons?
- does the Dragon Trail offer an interesting alternative for off-the-beaten-track tourism?
- is the Dragon's Trail revising and updating the semiotic map of the city?

In this study, a mixed-methods approach is used to accomplish this and includes qualitative data from desk research and participant observation. As a resident of Kraków since 1992, I am immersed in the day-to-day activities of city inhabitants and tourists. It also allowed me to follow the beginning of the idea of The Dragon Trail and its development. The desk research method involved an analysis of the literature (including printed and online sources, especially the official websites concerning Kraków's cultural heritage and tourism), archival queries, and analyses of the city of Kraków reports and planning documents concerning the participatory budget. The study also covered historical texts and reports, applicable documents and policies, and drafts of documents available for public and expert consultation. The choice of content analysis in the electronic media research method was dictated by the increasing importance of electronic media in the access to tourist information and the residents' participation in Kraków's development. The content analysis contained local, Poland-wide, and international web pages. During my research, I also talked to several employees from the Kraków Municipal Office (Urząd Miasta Krakowa) to clarify the details of the city's heritage and tourism policy issues<sup>2</sup>.

The problem related to the symbolic dimension of the iconosphere is dealt with in many fields of science, including art history, architectural theory, anthropology, sociology, human geography, and others. Each of these disciplines is permeated with different semiotic concepts. Architects assume the existence of an objective connection between a sign and a sign meaning and focus on their material, spatial carrier. Semioticians focus on ideas in the human mind, which are the subject of cognition.

Considering that, in my analysis of the collected data, I applied mostly a semiotic perspective, which significantly advanced the study of tourism. According to Jonathan Culler, tourists are the agents of semiotics: all over the world they are engaged in reading cities, landscapes, and cultures as sign systems [Culler 2007, p. 127-140]. As Culler puts it: "Particularly interesting are the processes by which touristic attractions are produced. We have already noted the dependency of sights on markers: 'empty' sites become sights through the attachment of markers" [Culler 2007, p. 137]. This process is important in the case of a dragon as a part of *par excellence* intangible heritage. Legendary creatures exist only in their representations. Moreover, the production of touristic sights relies on semiotic mechanisms whose operation may

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Mateusz Drożdż from the Department of Tourism in Kraków for providing me the important information on the project of *The Dragons Trail* and the photos.

seem quite local, but the general framework and product of these signifying mechanisms, the touristic code, is a modern consensus of vast scope knowledge of the world. When it comes to intangible heritage, we note processes and practices that are so ingrained that they are handed down by the generations. I would argue that the Dragon Trail is the alternative stage of including a dragon in Kraków's iconosphere.

### Literature review

There are several significant publications on understanding the concept of heritage in Poland. "HERITO" – an international quarterly published in Polish and English, published by the International Cultural Center in Kraków, is the only forum for debate on heritage, and culture [Herito 2023]. Jacek Purchla, chief editor and the head of the UNESCO Chair of Cultural Heritage underlines: "Heritage is nothing other than the use of the past to serve contemporary purposes" [Herito 2023]. The most important for this article is "HERITO, No 27: Kraków and the World". An important publication on the contemporary debate on this topic is also the book by Jacek Purchla *Heritage and Transformation* [published in 2005]. The author's thoughts center mainly on heritage protection issues in the context of the transformation that Central Europe has seen since 1989. He points out the differences in the way that Central Europe and Western Europe understand many geopolitical and historical concepts. This has a crucial influence on both the theory and the practice of heritage protection, and hence also on the legislative and financial solutions employed in this field [Rottermund 2005, p. 7].

The extensive study on tourism in Kraków is the article by Łukasz Matoga and Aneta Pawłowska: *Off-the-beaten-track tourism: a new trend in the tourism development in historical European cities. A case study of the city of Kraków, Poland* [Matoga, Pawłowska 2018]. The authors analyze the management of tourism in European historical cities in the context of off-the-beaten-track tourism's development using the case study of Kraków. They observe changes affecting the model of city tourism that stems from the shift in motivations of visitors and from alternative ways of spending free time in the city they are visiting.

There are also several significant books about dragons in a cultural heritage context<sup>3</sup>. Tracking the story of human memory, Michael Shawn Malone in his book *The Guardian of All Things: The Epic Story of Human Memory* [2012] states that

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<sup>3</sup> The word *dragon* entered the English language in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century from Old French *dragon*, which, in turn, comes from the Latin: *draco* meaning "huge serpent, dragon" [Ogden 2013].

draconic creatures are first described in the mythologies of the ancient Near East and appear in Mesopotamian art and literature. Like most mythical monsters, the dragon was usually a symbol of primordial chaos, the opposite of the divine cosmic order. Stories about storm gods or rulers slaying giant serpents occur throughout nearly all Near Eastern and Indo-European mythologies. Robert Blust in *The Origin of Dragons* [2000] argues that dragons are largely explicable as products of a convergence of rational pre-scientific speculation about the world of real events [Blust 2000]. A big collection of draconic traditions titled *The Myths, Legends, and Lore* by Doug Niles [2013] unravels the history behind these serpentine beasts with folklore, mythology, and poetry from every tradition in the world. James H. Charlesworth in his groundbreaking book: *The Good and Evil Serpent: How a Universal Symbol Became Christianized* [2010] explores the symbol of the serpent from 40,000 BCE to the present, and from diverse regions in the world. The resources start from the Bible and other religious texts to ancient statuary and jewelry. Charlesworth has arrived at a surprising conclusion: the serpent of ancient times was more often associated with positive attributes like healing and eternal life than it was with negative meanings [Charlesworth 2010].

This article focuses on dragons in post-classical European folklore and the reception of medieval heritage from middle Europe in contemporary Kraków. In this context, I refer to Christopher R. Fee's book *Mythology in the Middle Ages: Heroic Tales of Monsters, Magic, and Might* [2011]. Fee argues that the modern, western image of a dragon developed in Western Europe during the Middle Ages through the combination of the snakelike dragons of classical Graeco-Roman literature [Fee 2011]. According to David E. Jones, [An *Instinct for Dragons*, Routledge, 2000] the period between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries represents the height of European interest in dragons as living creatures.

The oldest recognizable image of a post-classical, western dragon appears in a hand-painted illustration from the medieval manuscript *MS Harley 3244*, which was produced in around 1260 AD [British Library 2023]. Its representation displays many of the same distinctive features as described in *The Book of Imaginary Beings* written by Jorge Luis Borges in collaboration with Margarita Guerrero [Borges, Guerrero 1957]. Here we read the Western Dragon is a tall-standing, heavy serpent with claws and wings, belching forth fire and smoke [Borges, Guerrero 1974, p. 153-154]. If we continue to read Borges' account, we learn that in Western culture

the dragon is a creature thought of as evil, one that evokes terror, hurts people, and ravages their possessions. Indeed, in the medieval era, dragons were often identified with Satan, due to the references to Satan as a “dragon” in the Book of Revelation [Fee 2011, p. 7]. The medieval legend of Saint George (Christian soldier) defeating the dragon who treated the villagers was a popular artistic representation in Europe, starting with the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD [Niles 2013, p. 53].

The Polish version of this creature named “smok” can be included in Slavic traditions. Although quite similar to other European dragons, Slavic dragons have their peculiarities. According to Wojciech Górczyk, those mythical beasts are rulers of the Underworld, guardians of gold deposits, but also the monsters that devour all social goods: treasures, cattle, and beautiful women [Górczyk 2010]. The status of Slavic dragons in cultural heritage is ambivalent – they are both protecting (the underground treasures) and threatening to the people.

A popular Polish folk tale is the legend of the Wawel Dragon (Polish: *Smok Wawelski*). The most recent publication on this subject is the book *Smok Wawelski w kręgu mitu i historii* [The Wawel Dragon in Circle of Myth and History, 2012] by Marek Sikorski. An interesting question is: when we meet the figure of Wawel Dragon for the first time in Polish history? The oldest known telling of the dragon’s story comes from the 13<sup>th</sup>-century work *Chronica Polonorum* attributed to the historian of Poland, Wincenty Kadłubek (1161–1223), the bishop of Kraków<sup>4</sup>. It is written in Latin at the turn of the 12 and 13 centuries and it describes the history of Poland. Kadłubek included in his work many legendary events which was a common practice among chronicles in the Middle Ages. In the first book of the Chronicle, we read a story of Grakh /Graccus, i.e. Krak Prince who – according to the oral tradition – in the 7<sup>th</sup> century was the ruler of the Vistulans tribe. His kingdom was terrorized by the dragon presented under the pseudo-Greek term *holophagus* – “whole-devourer”. This name described his voracity – “one who swallows whole”. According to the chronicler, the beast required a weekly number of livestock. If its expectations were not met, the monster consumed local inhabitants.

Juan Antonio Álvarez-Pedrosa analyzes the story in the article *Kraków’s Foundation Myth: An Indo-European Theme Through the Eyes of Medieval Erudition*

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<sup>4</sup> Written between 1190 and 1208, *Chronica seu originale regum et principum Polonorum* is as a kind of dialogue between two people: Jan (John, Archbishop of Gniezno) and Mateusz (Matthew, Bishop of Kraków).

[2009]. Prince Krak proposed to his sons that his kingdom would be given to the one who kills the monster. They could not defeat the creature with the sword, so they came up with a trick, taking advantage of his voracity. They set a cattle skin full of burning sulfur that the dragon greedily swallowed; then the beast died of suffocation from the smoke of the flames inside. After the success, the Krak's sons argued over who killed the beast and who would get the throne. The younger prince murdered his elder brother. Blaming the dragon for the death he took sole credit. However, his crime was soon revealed, and he got expelled from the country. In the end, the tale tells about the foundation of the settlement of Kraków on the site where the monster had lived [Álvarez-Pedrosa 2009, p. 165-166].

As happens often, the story is enriched with various elements over time. The second version of the story is found in the 15th-century chronicle written by Polish diplomat Jan Długosz (1415-1480). In *Annals or Chronicles of the Famous Kingdom of Poland*, he introduced some changes to the previous story. It is Polish prince Krak himself who kills the monster by feeding him animal bodies filled with burning sulfur, and tar. Długosz also adds the detail that the dragon lived in a cave of Wawel Hill upon which King Krak had built his castle. Finally, according to the 16th-century Polish Chronicle by Marcin Bielski, it is a shoemaker named Skuba who killed the monster a sheep filled with sulfur. The monster, feeling the fire in his throat, drinks water from the Vistula River until he dies. This is the first version of the legend written in Polish (the previous ones were in Latin). It became the starting point for many popular, fairytale versions of the tale, written by Polish poets and novelists.

The first known visual representation of the Wawel Dragon can be found in the 16th-century book *Cosmographia Universalis* by Sebastian Münster – the earliest German-language description of the world (fig. 2).



Figure 2: *Cosmographie Universalis* by Sebastian Münster, 1544, public domain.

The detailed study about how Kraków's origins and history origins closely intertwine with the figure of the dragon offers Małgorzata Pietrzak in her article documenting the omnipresent dragon element in the cultural landscape of the city [Pietrzak 2015]. The study contains photographs of dragons mounted as decorations on gutter tables, shows sculptures of dragons, and also dragons as decorations of facades and porticos of edifices, churches, houses, and residential city buildings. It tells the story of a city where the process of searching for the absolute meaning keeps happening, for the inhabitants to find a sense of security and a sense of belonging – but also shaping their worlds. I will prove that these activities are linked with the new Dragon Trail.

### **The Wawel Dragon's monuments as a tourist attraction**

What does the tourist attraction consist of? Answering this question, Dean McCannell first applied the semiotic theory by Ch. S. Peirce to tourism research and proposed a semiotic system of tourist attractions. According to McCannell, the tourist attraction is an empirical relationship between the tourist, the view, and the marker (information about the scenery), which can take many forms: information plaques, or souvenirs [MacCannell 2018]. Recognition that the attraction is the Wawel Dragon itself leads to a kind of paradox: in this case, we have to ascertain... – no view. The absence of the dragon himself is compensated by the sight of the monuments linked with this legendary creature.

The tale is closely linked with the foundation of Kraków and then closely linked with Wawel Hill. For centuries The Royal Castle and the Cathedral on Wawel Hill were the residence of Polish rulers, their necropolis, and the place where the history of Poland was shaped. The castle is now one of the country's premier art museums, established in 1930. The Wawel Royal Cathedral features a plaque commemorating the dragon's defeat by Polish ruler Kraków who, according to the inscription, founded the city and built his palace over the slain dragon's cave. In front of the entrance to the cathedral, there are bones of Pleistocene whale and mammoth hanging on a chain. They were found and carried to the cathedral in medieval times as the remains of a dragon [Wood 2008, p. 183].

Another monument is the element of nature: the supposed Dragon's Den is a cave on the slope of Wawel Hill, formed 12 million years ago. The cave became a famous tavern and brothel during Medieval Times. In 1565 King Zygmunt II August ordered the openings to be bricked up, as the cave was inhabited by vagabonds and beggars.

In 1974 the cave was adapted for visitors. The 80-meter-long route leads along corridors and across chambers with fossils and assorted karst formations to the riverside.

Apart from the cave, on Wawel Hill, there is another token of the dragon – the Wawel Dragon Statue. It is a bronze sculpture 20 meters tall, designed by Bogusław Chromy (fig. 3-4). The monument was installed in 1972 in front of the Dragon's Den. The statue is capable of breathing fire in about 5-minute intervals (natural gas is a fuel). Later it was also modernized so that the fire breath could be triggered by an SMS text message. The service is popular and receives at least 2,500 requests a day. The statue quickly became a “traditional” element of the modern Kraków landscape and a major tourist attraction of the city, particularly for children. As far as I remember, as a schoolgirl visiting Kraków on a guided tour in the 80-ties: the Wawel Dragon monument and Dragon's Den were must-see for every tourist.

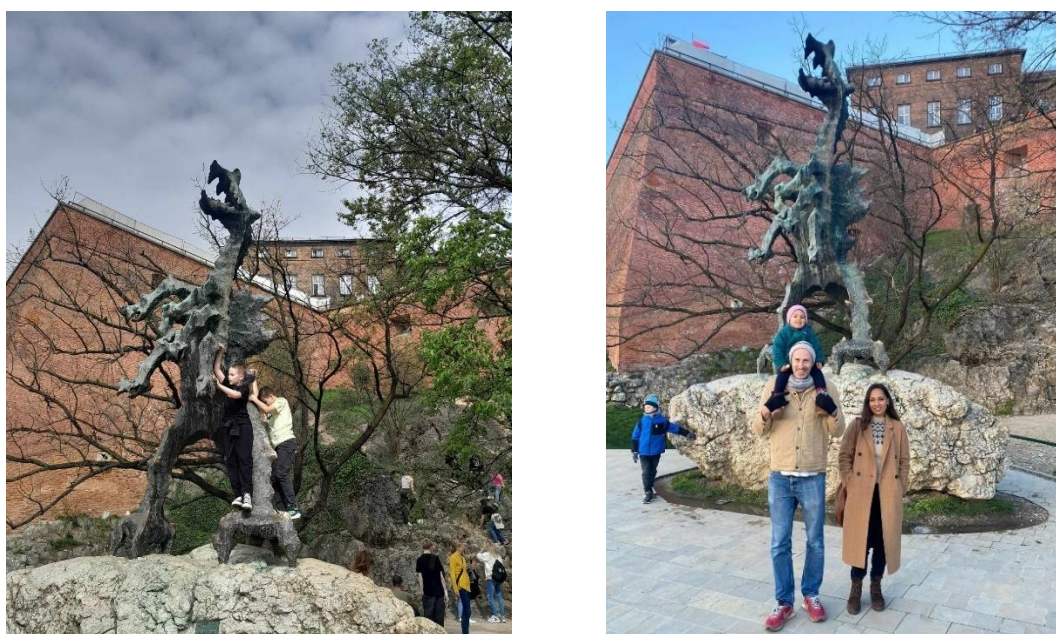


Fig. 3-4. The tourists in front of the Wawel Dragon Statue designed B. Chromy, *photo: Elżbieta Wiącek*

The presence of the dragon goes beyond the Wawel Hill area. Those who like to individually explore the urban and architectural complexity of Kraków will find out that the dragons are in almost every street of the city's districts. Dragons, hidden from the eyes of busy passers-by and tourists, lurk above the entrance gates and tenement houses, spit water flowing from the roofs, look proudly from the facades, and guard the entrances to the gates [Pietrzak 2015].

## **The origin of the Dragon Trail and the controversy around its implementation**

In 2021 a formal initiative linked with the symbol of Wawel Dragon was brought up within the framework of the citizen's budget in Kraków (also known as the participatory budget) that provides residents an opportunity to propose community projects in a public competition for city funds. According to Resolution nr LI/1410/21 by the City Council of Kraków participatory budget shall be understood as a specific form of social consultations concerning the allocation of part of the funds from the budget of the City of Kraków for projects indicated by the residents that fall within the competences of the Kraków Municipality and Powiat Krakowski. The implementation and execution of the participatory budget should consist of the following stages: 1) information and education campaign; 2) consultation meetings with residents; 3) submitting projects; 4) verification of the submitted projects; 5) voting; 6) implementation of the selected projects [City Council of Kraków 2021]. District projects may be submitted by any resident of the City in the District of their choice. The projects submitted are subject to formal, substantive, and legal verification done by the relevant organizational units of the Kraków City Hall or other municipal organizational units.

The approved projects are put to a vote. Voting takes place via a dedicated internet platform and in conventional polling places arranged in the City. Each voter votes for three different city-wide projects and three different district projects<sup>5</sup>. Projects selected for implementation are considered the projects that received the highest number of points until the pool of funds allocated to the participatory budget is depleted. The final valuation made by the Mayor is used to determine the value of the projects. The sum of the obtained points determines the order of the projects on the ranking list. The schedule for the implementation of the participatory budget is established by the Mayor through an Ordinance and made public. As a resident in the territory of the Kraków Municipality since 2010 I regularly take part in the voting on projects and I can see the real, positive impact of participants on the changes in the city area.

In 2020 on the voting list on the official website of the citizen's budget in Kraków appeared the project named: *Dragon Trail Modeled by Wroclaw Dwarfs – Dragon Every Step* (nr BO.D1.1/20). The authors of the concept were Anna Jakubiak, Witold

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<sup>5</sup> The highest-voted project receives 3 points and the lowest-voted project 1 point.

Górny, and Mariusz Meus. The proposed project initially assumed the creation of 10 small (20-50 cm), dwarf-like bronze sculptures of dragons that would be put in public spaces, in various interesting tourist places. By their attributes (f. e. a camera or basket) the dragons were supposed to refer to the places where they would be located. The figures were modeled on the previous similar initiative – Dwarf Trail – completed in the city of Wrocław in southwestern Poland. Wrocław’s tourist attraction consists of dwarves situated in different places and enhancing the local atmosphere, especially appealing to children. Dwarf Trail, initially treated as an unconventional artistic project, has over the years become the city’s showcase, standing out against the background of Wrocław, which is a very attractive tourist site. Dwarves do not compete with Wrocław’s monuments, but rather complement them and act as guides to them (information system connected with QR codes). Recently, the dwarves have also become a link between the city and the local enterprises operating there, becoming a tool for their marketing and cooperation.



Fig. 5. The sculptures of the project *Dragon Trail* waiting to be installed, photo: Mateusz Drożdż

The initiators of the project Dragon Trail were planning to apply a similar strategy and to put the sculptures in various places of the 1<sup>st</sup> District of the city also called “Old Town” (Polish: Dzielnica Pierwsza, Stare Miasto)<sup>6</sup>. Administrative District No. 1. It consists of the historical Old Town itself, as well as the Wawel Castle Hill, the former largely Jewish quarter of Kazimierz, and some other neighborhoods surrounding the old town. A large part of the 1<sup>st</sup> District is on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites. The authors of the project Dragon Trail claimed in 2020 that the location of the proposed initiative in Kraków’s Old Town is not accidental.

<sup>6</sup> The Polish name for such a district is “dzielnica”. Since 1991, the city of Kraków has been divided into 18 administrative districts, each with a degree of autonomy within the municipal government; <http://www.krakow-info.com/district.htm>, accessed: 1.06.2024.

They assumed that: “The attractiveness of this District on a city scale and the multitude of attractive tourist attractions located within it mean that the proposed trail would have a great chance to contribute to the promotion of the unique values of the Old Town among the inhabitants of Kraków and tourists from outside our city” [Budżet 2020].

The idea of creating the Dragon Trail got enough support from the inhabitants in the stage of voting to proceed. However, in most of the urban area of District I – the Old Town is entered into the registers of monuments following the *Act of 23 July 2003 on the protection and care of monuments*. According to the Art. 36. 1 section 1 point 11 of the Act the permission of the provincial conservator of monuments is required while taking actions that could lead to changing the appearance of the monument entered in the register. Placing dragon figurines then would require the consent of the city’s authorities responsible for protecting the local heritage and shaping the visual aspect of the urban landscape. Considering these regulations, the Department of Tourism addressed the local authorities with a request to issue an opinion regarding the project. The main question was: whether placing dragons’ figurines in urban space is consistent with the city’s policies. The Provincial Office for the Protection of Monuments in Kraków issued a negative opinion on the implementation the Dragon Trail project. Provincial Conservator of Monuments – Monika Bogdanowska – justifying her opinion, emphasized that: “The protection of the urban layout aims to minimize interference by placing this type of modern objects in its space” [Budżet 2020]. Visual Artist of the City of Kraków Agnieszka Łakoma also expressed a negative opinion of the project, pointing out that the introduction of new elements is against the rules for the use and protection of public space of the historical complex of the City of Kraków. She pointed out that: “Activities in the area may not: [...] violate the historical tradition associated with the place, or the representative character of the space”. In their opinion, both the Conservator of Monuments and the City Artist referred to the tradition and history of Kraków, emphasizing that the figure of the Wawel dragon is closely related to the location at the foot of Wawel Hill [Budżet 2020].

In the face of the authorities’ objections, in 2022 the location of the Dragon Trail project had to be changed. The initiative focused on District XIII Podgórze and District V Krowodrza. District Podgórze, excluding the urban area, entered the list of monuments and was defined in the so-called landscape resolution. District

Krowodrza which surrounds the Old Town from the north, is full of modernist buildings.

The figure designs were prepared by famous Kraków cartoonists: Andrzej Mleczko and Edward Lutczyn. In turn, they were made by the artist from the Faculty of Sculpture of the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków – prof. Jan Tutaj and dr Jacek Dudek [Bajorek-Dziuban 2022]. Each dragon sculpture has a different appearance, and an attribute closely related to the selected place in a given district. Dragons were put in unusual places, and their presence usually heralds an interesting story, legend, or memory of an original person.

In November 2023 the first dragon out of seven was installed in the presence of the city's authorities. The Surveyor's Dragon is equipped with the optical level on a tripod, helmet, and bag (fig.6). He is standing at Avenue Dembowskiego in Podgórze. This is where the Kraków Prime Meridian, i.e. Lesser Poland's Greenwich, runs. This line marks the north-south direction, and its history dates back to the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. 500 years before the Greenwich Meridian [Smoczy Szlak 2023]. It is a geodetic line connecting the Earth's poles; as the zero meridian, it is a symbolic line dividing the world into East and West, which is deeply meaningful in the context of the history of Poland. Famous astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus, used it in his work *Radices ad meridianum Cracoviensem (On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres)*. Not far from the Surveyor's Dragon is the Krakus Mound, the oldest mound in Kraków (from the 7<sup>th</sup> century), offering a marvelous panorama of the city. Legend has it that it is the tomb of Prince Krak – the founder of Kraków, who is said to have conquered the dragon.



Fig. 6. The Surveyor's Dragon, photo: „Hasające Zające”  
Source: <https://hasajacezajace.com/smoczy-szlak-smoki-w-krakowie/>

Another one – The Dragon Tourist, is located at Parkowa Street, also in Podgórze district. Like a well-equipped tourist, he holds a camera with an impressive lens (fig. 7). It is a reminder that travel and tourism are bound up with photographic practices and the significance of ‘the visual’ [Crawshaw, Urry 2002]. The location at the entrance to Bednarski Park is not accidental – the park is located where there has been a quarry since medieval times. The park was established in 1896 on the initiative of a community activist from Podgórze, Wojciech Bednarski (1841-1914). It is a unique park because it was the first one to be built on reclaimed post-industrial areas. In the interwar period, the park was expanded to include the area of a former quarry with high limestone walls, called “Twardowski’s school”. The legendary sorcerer Jan Twardowski was said to have had his alchemy workshop here.

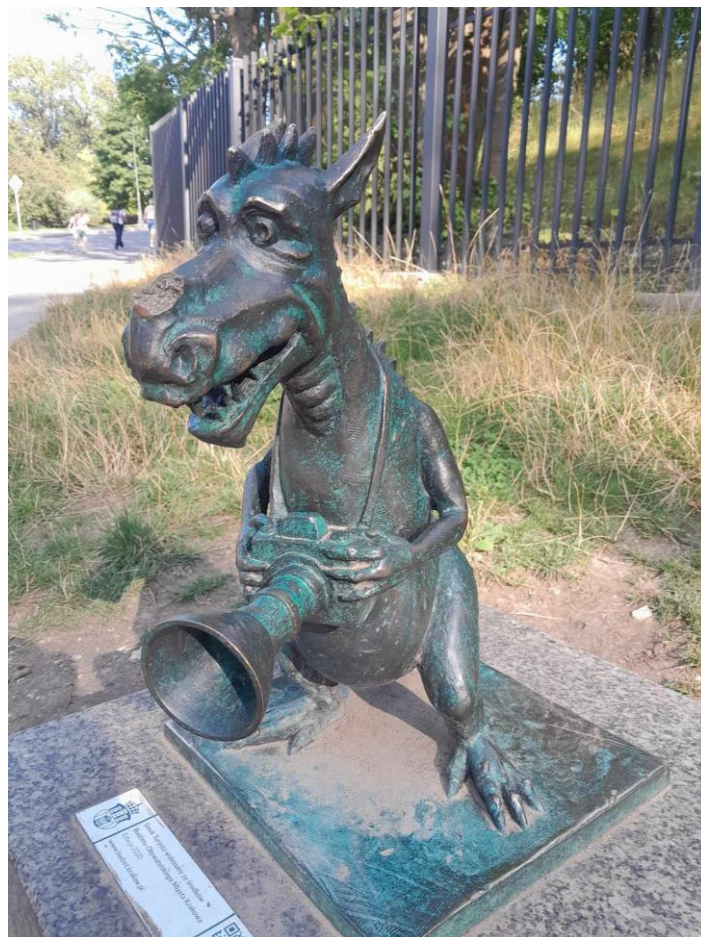


Fig. 7. The Dragon Tourist, *photo: Elżbieta Wiqcek*

One statue – The Water Dragon – is in District I – the Old Town, near Wawel, on the corner of Powiśle Street, near Wawel, but outside the UNESCO zone. The dragon figurine is waist-deep in water and is about to eat the caught fish, which is a reminder of the past (fig.8). Before this area was drained, there were ponds and

wetlands here - the former Vistula river port. According to one version of the legend, the Wawel dragon drowned in the nearby wetlands called “Żabikruk”.



Fig. 8. The Water Dragon, photo: “Hasające Zające”

Part of the Dragon Trail goes through Krowodrza – the District with strong identity<sup>7</sup>. On Axentowicza’s Square, we can find the Dragon Painter holding a picture frame. This attribute refers to the patron of this square. Teodor Axentowicz (1859-1938) was a Polish painter and graphic artist of Armenian origin. He came to Kraków in 1895, when he took up the position of professor at the School of Fine Arts<sup>8</sup>. He was one of the leading representatives of Young Poland’s art inspired by Polish folklore and a creator of salon portraits.

<sup>7</sup> Krowodrza is known as the site of the main branch of the National Museum in Kraków, as well as the spiritual home of Polish football giants Wisła Kraków.

<sup>8</sup> Later, he was also the rector of the Kraków Academy of Fine Arts.



Fig.9. The Dragon Painter, photo: Sandra Krzyżak

Source: <https://szlakowe.pl/rzezby-smokow-w-krakowie-smoczy-szlak/>

Not far from the square of his name, in Park Krakowski, we will find the Dragon with the Map (fig.10). He is standing at the crossroad and glances at the open plan as if he is lost or in thought about which direction to go. No wonder that he is hesitating as this part of the city is full of interesting places, including nearby Museum of Krakow Branch on Pomorska street (exhibition: People of Kraków in Times of Terror 1939-1945-1956). The historical significance has Park Krakowski itself, opened in 1887 by Stanisław Rehman (1838-1899), entrepreneur, and at that time a city councilor as a response to the needs of a new place for recreation and entertainment for the inhabitants of Kraków [Michalik, 1996]. The park was established outside the then borders of the city and modeled on Viennese folk gardens. During World War II, air raid shelters were built in the park, still hidden under the park greenery. A characteristic element of the park is a pond with an island on which a spreading willow grows. The permanent gallery of modern outdoor sculptures is an important element of the composition of the park. The gallery consists of two teams. The first one was implemented in the 1970s, and the second in the 1990s. Currently, the park features 19 abstract sculptures made of concrete, stone and metal, making the park an outdoor art gallery. The park was revitalized by the Municipality of Krakow in 2016-2018, and the Krakow City Council named it after Marek Grechuta (1945-2006), a singer and poet.



Fig. 10. The Dragon with the Map, *photo: "Hasające Zajqce"*

The next sculpture in Krowodrza is the Dragon with the Kite in Jordan Park, installed next to the entrance gate. Why the kite? In the past, a kite festival was also held on a vast meadow called Błonia adjacent to the park. Besides, a kite is a symbol of childhood and fun. This park was founded by Henryk Jordan (1842-1907), a pioneer of physical education in Poland, who was famous for establishing play gardens for children, the so-called Jordan gardens.

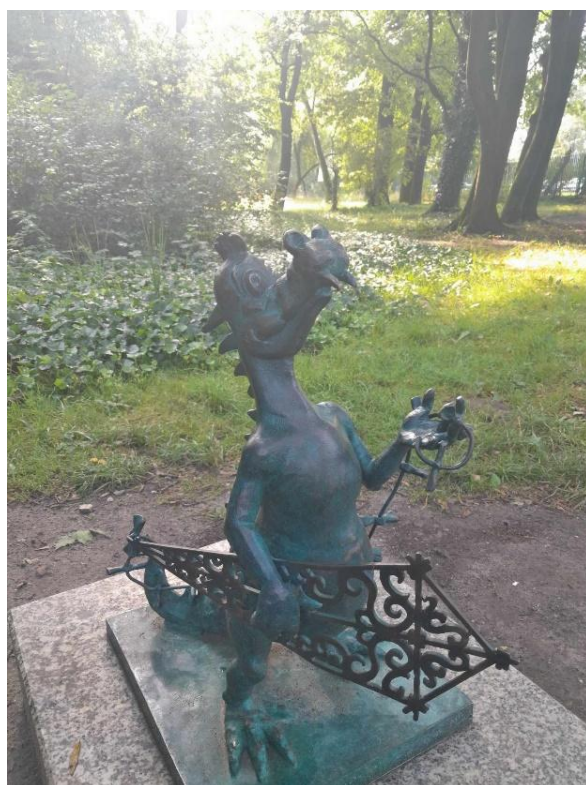


Fig. 11. The Dragon with the Kite, *photo: Elżbieta Wiqcek*

Only a few minutes of a walk across Błonia, we approach Kraków's iconic Kijów Cinema. It was established in 1967 and was the largest cinema in Kraków at that time. The building is considered a masterpiece of Kraków's modernist architecture. A few meters from the main entrance to the cinema there is another dragon figurine – the Filmmaker Dragon. He stands accompanied by the camera. His presence also refers to the famous award. During the Kraków Film Festival, organized since 1961, and held in Kijów Cinema awards “Golden Dragon” and “Silver Dragon” are given, among others. The model of the statuette was also created by sculptor Bronisław Chromy (1925-2017), the author of the Wawel Dragon monument.



Figure 12. The Filmmaker Dragon, photo: photo: Sandra Krzyżak  
Source: <https://szlakowe.pl/rzezby-smokow-w-krakowie-smoczy-szlak/>

In June 2024, the Dragon Trail gained a new member – the Dragon Kazimierz installed in Grzegórzki District, at Podgórska Street. This one was created on the initiative of Galeria Kazimierz one of the largest shopping malls in Kraków (opened in 2005). Part of the mall are restored brick buildings restored, that are over 150 years old and still serve Krakow's inhabitants, although in a different role than the one for which they were originally built. For many years, there was a municipal

slaughterhouse there, built in 1878 according to the design of Maciej Moraczewski (1840-1928), the architect who also designed the building of the Academy of Fine Arts and the Fire Department in Kraków. Both the mall and dragon's name are related to the neighboring Kazimierz District, which for many centuries was a place where ethnic Polish and Jewish cultures coexisted and intermingled. However, the new dragon carrying big shopping bags has nothing to do with these connotations – he is just the embodiment of a satisfied consumer.

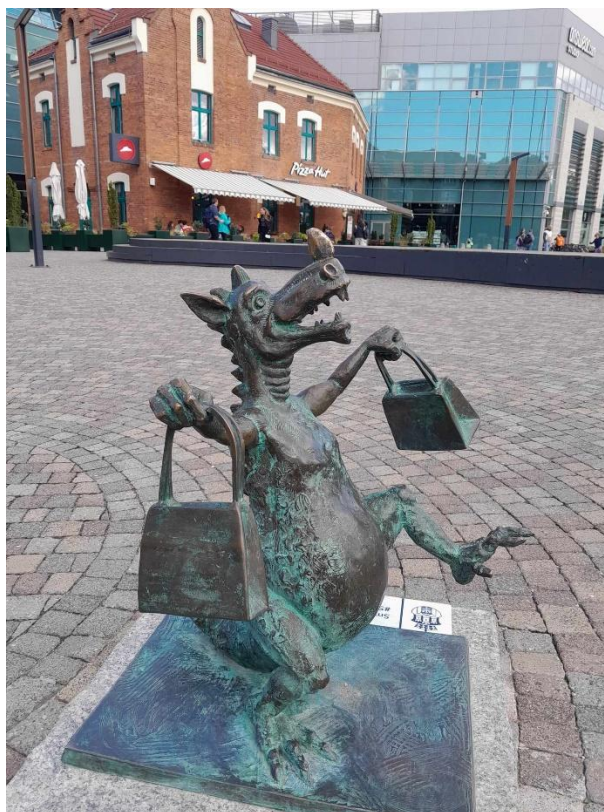


Fig. 13. The Dragon Kazimierz, photo: *Elżbieta Wiącek*

In 2024, at the end of August, The Road Administration of the City of Kraków started the assembly of the next batch of dragon figures, as part of a project from the civic budget<sup>9</sup>. The Dragon Astronomer, situated on Kopernika (Copernicus) Street holding instruments known from paintings about Nicolaus Copernicus, refers to the history of astronomy in Kraków<sup>10</sup>, and especially to the first state astronomical observatory at Collegium Śniadecki, which was located in the nearby Botanical Garden.

<sup>9</sup> The report from that event and all the photos can be find in the article: [CowKrakowie.pl](https://cowkrakowie.pl) 2024.

<sup>10</sup> The Dragon encourages you to learn about the achievements of famous astronomers associated with Kraków – not only Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), but also Jan Śniadecki (1756-1830), Tadeusz Banachiewicz (1882-1954), and Kazimierz Kordylewski (1903-1981).



Fig. 14-15. The Dragon Astronomer, *photo: Paweł Plichta*

The Garden itself is worth visiting because its collection includes several thousand different plants. Some plants remember the times of the First Polish Republic because the garden was founded in 1783 on the initiative of the National Education Commission and is the oldest Polish botanical garden. Besides, the garden area is crossed by one of the oldest prime meridians in Europe and the world, which runs along the line  $19^{\circ}57'21.21''$  E. This location ties Dragon Astronomer with Surveyor's Dragon. Although the memory of the Kraków meridian has been overshadowed by the London meridian, this special location provides an unusual opportunity to stand in both hemispheres – eastern and western – at the same time.

On Kopernika Street, the passengers can also find two more sculptures. The Dragon with a Meter stands in front of the fence of the church of St. Nicholas – one of the oldest religious buildings in Kraków. Although it is in the Baroque style, it dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The dragon wants to remind visitors of an almost completely forgotten figure: Stanisław Pudłowski (1597-1645) Polish mathematician, physicist, and astronomer, rector of the Kraków Academy, who was active in science in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He had an observatory and a physics laboratory in the buildings of the rectory of the church of St. Nicholas. He formulated the concept of universal longitude by examining the meridian running through Kraków.



Fig. 16-17. The Dragon with a Meter, photo: Paweł Plichta

Dragon's attribute – a ruler with a scale – refers to the meter invented by Pułkowski. He was the first mathematician who proposed basing units of measurement on physical phenomena and the dimensions of the Earth. Together with the Italian inventor Tito Livio Burattini (Polish: Tytus Liwiusz Burattini), he came up with the idea of adopting the length of a second pendulum as a universal measure. The unit was to be called the *metro cattolico* (lit. “catholic [i.e. universal] meter”; Polish: “metr katolicki”), a unit of length equivalent to the length of a free seconds pendulum [Mikuła 2015]<sup>11</sup>. This meter was 0.994 of the currently used meter, the standard of which is located in Sevres near Paris, so it differed from the current meter by only 6 mm. Moreover: the scientist and engineer Burattini, who cooperated with Pułkowski had a lot in common with dragons. Burattini traveled worldwide, measured various structures, and designed machines like this “*Dragon Volant*” (lit. “Flying Dragon”). During his stay in Warsaw in 1647, Burattini built a model aircraft (fig.18). Described as “four pairs of wings attached to an elaborate ‘dragon’”, it was said to have successfully lifted a cat. According to Clive Hart's *The Prehistory*

<sup>11</sup> Boratyni developed this concept into an entire system of interrelated units of length, volume and weight. He explained all this in the Latin treatise *Misura universale* (Universal Measure), published in Vilnius in 1675, proposing to call the basic unit - corresponding to the length of the seconds pendulum – “catholic, or universal meter”. Although Boratyni did justice to Pułkowski in this publication, clearly stating that he was the author of this concept of universal measure, he did not serve him well by delaying its announcement for thirty years. As a result, Pułkowski's priority in this field is not widely known.

*of Flight*, he promised that “only the most minor injuries” would result from landing the craft.

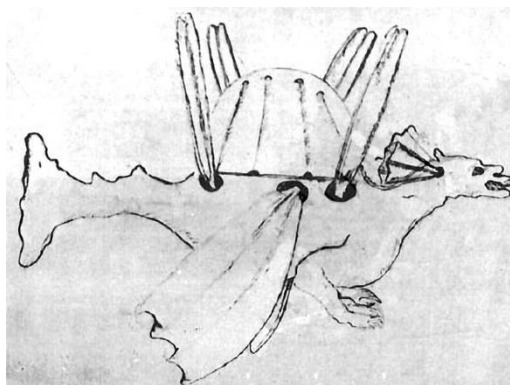


Fig. 18. Sketch of Tito Livio Burattini's Dragon Volant, or Flying Dragon. Originally appeared in Burattini's treatise *Ars Volanti* from 1647

One more thing worth mentioning in the context of the Dragon with a Meter – he stands at the height of the Lantern of the Dead, situated next to the church. In the Middle Ages, this type of lantern stood in front of cemeteries and hospitals for infectious diseases to warn passers-by about the plague air.

Another sculpture on Kopernika Street – the Doctor Dragon is installed in front of the entrance to the Department of Surgery of the Jagiellonian University (fig. 19-20). Among the new ten figures, the inhabitants and tourists can also find the Photographer Dragon at the MUFFO Museum of Photography (on Rakowicka Street).



Fig. 19-20. The Doctor Dragon; photo: Paweł Plichta

At the Mogilskie roundabout next to the relics Kraków Fortress, a figure of the Soldier CK Dragon was installed. He is on guard duty equipped with a Mannlicher rifle, magazines for it in belt pouches, a backpack, and a military hat from the period of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy (fig. 21-22). This explains the abbreviation “CK” the Polish version (Cesarski i Królewski) of the phrase “Imperial and Royal” (German: *kaiserlich und königlich*), which refers to the court/government of the Habsburgs from a broader historical perspective<sup>12</sup>. The dragon guards the relics of Bastion V “Lubicz”, partially exposed in the roundabout. However, if visitors to the dragon would like to see what such a bastion looked like, they can go to Bastion III “Kleparz”, because they were almost identical. Both bastions, where soldiers were stationed and cannons were kept, were built in the 1860s. They were connected by embankments. The forts and soldiers of the Kraków Fortress were useful during World War I. The fortifications helped the Austro-Hungarian troops, supported by German troops and legionary units, successfully repel Russian attacks in November and December 1914. Just a dozen or so years ago, this area was buried because the fortifications that guarded Kraków from the Mogiła route were replaced by the need for public transport. In the years 2004-2008, during the reconstruction of the roundabout into a two-level one with trams on level -1, preserved fragments of the fort were uncovered.



Fig. 21-22. The Soldier CK Dragon, photo: Paweł Plichta

<sup>12</sup> Some modern authors restrict its use to the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary from 1867 to 1918.



The aim of Dragons Trail is not just to entertain but also to educate about local heritage. Each of the dragons' attributes refers to the tradition and history of the place of foundation. Besides, all the sculptures are equipped with a QR code. Scanning the code would enable passers-by to obtain interesting information about the historical and cultural context of the site. This way the dragons can function as kind of tour guides.



Fig. 24. The Smok Lajkonik, photo: *krakow.pl*

The identity of most of the new dragons refers to the long-lasting city's traditions, while some of them refer to new customs. The first one is the case of the Smok Lajkonik, which will be installed at Konik Zwierzyniecki Square (fig. 23). *Lajkonik* is one of the most characteristic symbols of Kraków, recognizable throughout Poland and worldwide. *Lajkonik* is the main protagonist of a popular urban festival held annually in Kraków in mid-June. As expected the bearded actor who plays the *lajkonik* role wears a pseudo-oriental costume resembling Tatar attire and moves on a hobby horse attached around his belt. *Lajkonik* is a story, a ritual, a legend, a spectacle, a tourist attraction, but above all a myth – one that constitutes the city. Once a year,

he travels the same traditional, several-kilometer-long route from the Zwierzyniec District to the Main Market Square accompanied by, among others, a group of bargemen (*włóczkowie*) and musicians (*mlaskoty*) [Kłagisz 2023, p. 39]<sup>13</sup>. On his way, the *lajkonik* touches spectators with his golden mace (*buława*), which is supposed to bring prosperity the whole next year, and takes his tribute. The origins of this ritual are uncertain but there are some common stories associated with its popularity [Okręglińska 2019, p. 289-291]. It is usually associated with the 13<sup>th</sup> century when the city was attacked during the Mongol invasion of Poland. According to local legend the Polish raftsmen, trying to repel the enemy, attacked the Mongol camp in Zwierzyniec (at this time a village near Kraków), killed the leader of the unit, and then dressed in Tatar robes, they triumphantly entered Kraków. The bravest of them, the prototype of Kraków's Lajkonik, had ridden the elegant horse of the Tatar commander. It gave rise to the latter, the original disguise of the rider at the head of the procession and the annual celebration of the victory [Adamczewski 1992, p. 147]. The Lajkonik Parade is one of the few Kraków customs of a secular nature, which has been maintained for several centuries thanks to continuous intergenerational transmission among the inhabitants of Kraków<sup>14</sup>. In 2014, the *lajkonik* procession was included on the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage [Szoka 2016, p. 256]. Like traditional Lajkonik, the dragon carries a mace and wears a characteristic high, patterned turban topped with a crescent moon and studded with beads. His clothes and patterns on hobby horse attached around his waist resemble *lajkonik*'s contemporary attire designed in 1904 by the Polish artist Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907). The sculpture is an intriguing hybrid of a dragon and a horse. Both of them connect this peculiar figure with the worldwide symbolic universe. The tradition of the *lajkonik*'s parade is considered by many to be unique for Kraków, some scholars point to its probable pre-Christian origin and possible connection with the existing similar folklore phenomena in other cultures of the world with rituals whose basic prop is a figure of a horse [Janeczko 2020, p. 256]. In this context, *lajkonik*'s procession gains additional significance in connection with world heritage. Both horses,

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<sup>13</sup> Mateusz Kłagisz notices that the actor wearing a horseman-shaped costume is part of a rich history of popular theatrical forms found in various regions of the Iranian world. In his article, Kłagisz explores the parallel between the Polish *lajkonik* and the Tajik *aspakbozi*. He argues that also non-Iranian and non-Slavic examples indicate that one is dealing here with a universal, parallel ethnographic phenomenon.

<sup>14</sup> Initially, the organization of the parade was organized by the local convent of Norbertines. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was the Kraków magistrate who took responsibility for this task.

and dragons, appear in myths, and various folk rituals, mostly of a religious character, because of their special powers.

What changes the Dragon Trail in Kraków's iconosphere? While most sculptures in the Dragon Trail refer to old stories and famous people of Kraków, two figurines refer to the city's contemporary life, updating its semiotic universe. One of them is the Dragon Kazimierz which embodies the satisfied customer of a shopping mall. Another is the Dragon Romantic which carries a big padlock in the heart shape. He stands by the footbridge connecting two districts of Kraków – Kazimierz and Podgórze. The footbridge is named after Father Laetus Bernatek (1847-1927) from the nearby Bernardine monastery. He initiated the construction of the Hospital of the Brothers. The footbridge itself, consisting of separate platforms for pedestrians and cyclists, was put into use in 2010, and part of its construction costs were covered by funds obtained by the Municipality of Kraków from the European Union. Why the nearby dragon is called romantic? From the beginning of its existence, the footbridge became Kraków's Bridge of Love, as evidenced by numerous padlocks with names, initials, expressions of love, and dates put on the metal mesh. Couples in love, as a sign of the durability of their feelings, throw keys that could open a padlock into the Vistula River<sup>15</sup>. This new custom is not characteristic only of Kraków. In many cities, the symbol of romanticism has become a padlock with the names or initials of lovers, which can be attached to a permanent element, and the key is thrown away. In the Dragon Trail, the unique city stories merge with the nets of popular culture which spreading influence is impossible to ignore.



Fig. 25. The Dragon Romantic, *photo: Elżbieta Wiqcek*

<sup>15</sup> There were so many of these tokens of love that the weight of the footbridge increased dangerously and it became necessary to renovate it and remove the excessive load.

Another impact of the new trail on the city's iconosphere is the spatial dimension. It significantly expands the presence of the Wawel Dragon beyond the Old Town (situated in the center). It attracts visitors to a slightly larger area than the very center of Kraków. Moreover, it encourages exploration of other districts: their history, monuments, and micro-stories related to their places. It deepens knowledge about the city not only for tourists but also for its residents. For example, the Smok Lajkonik's location will inspire you to visit the Zwierzyniec area – once a village, later a suburb, and today one of 18 districts of Kraków, located in the western part of the city. The new trail may be the opportunity to visit “Zwierzyniec House” (a branch of the Museum of Kraków) a typical suburban tenement house from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century hosting the permanent exhibition *Suburban Apartment a Century Ago*. The exhibition shows everyday objects, many of which now seem mysterious, linked with the history and folklore of Kraków's suburbs [Travel 2023]. The other new members of the dragon family motivate people to explore District XIII – Podgórze, whose history dates back to 1784 when the Free City of Podgórze was founded on the right side of the Vistula River. In 1915, Podgórze was incorporated into the city of Kraków as one of the districts. The District of Podgórze was excluded for many years from tourism development realized by the local government and that situation allowed to maintain the authenticity of the area. The market square, local road network, and the type and arrangement of residential development (tenement houses among other things) – all these elements shape the distinct image of Podgórze in contrast to the Old City. The decisive moment for the development of tourism in the district was in 2010 when the footwalk for cyclists and pedestrians over Vistula was opened to the public, connecting Podgórze with the Tourist Business Division (TBD). From that moment on, there has been a consistent development of cultural institutions, accommodation, and theme routes. However, it can be said that Podgórze still retains the atmosphere of a small town. It is a space where the residents live their daily lives, run their small businesses, and spend their free time. Popular hotel and restaurant chains together with large-format shopping malls are absent from the district. This set of characteristics is the object of interest for tourists traveling off-the-beaten-track [Matoga, Pawłowska 2018].

Following the Dragons Trail, both inhabitants of Kraków and tourists from Poland and abroad can see many less popular but interesting places outside of must-see spots and learn about the local histories. This initiative not only opens

the possibility of new interpretations of the medieval symbol in the contemporary urban space but also reflects the current socio-cultural changes, namely the process of de-centralization in mapping the city and its heritage. This new mapping also involves social media and interactions with people interested in the new route. The project's fan page on Facebook "A dragon every step, i.e. the dragon trail in Kraków" labeled the initiative as the first walking route and city game on the trail of dragons. Even a brief study of the fan page allows us to estimate the popularity of the trail. At the beginning of September 2024, the fan page had 1,500 followers [Smok 2024]. The posts with photos on the fan page show us how the small size of bronze dragons provokes extremely different behaviors. The fact that dragons' figurines are not elevated but installed on the ground, makes them accessible to both acts of kindness and more vulnerable to vandalism. The Dragon Tourist is the first to be brazenly dehorned. The frame held by the Painter Dragon was also damaged. However, this vulnerability also gives space to caring gestures – last winter, some people wrapped most of the little dragons in warm, colorful scarfs, hats, and coats knitted especially for their size. On the fan page, you can also find photos documenting how some people put their mascots next to the sculptures. In the city, buildings, architectural details, or monuments can become signs and symbols only when they gain social acceptance. The legend of the Wawel Dragon has been accepted long ago by the city community as an element co-creating the history of Kraków. Legend transformed into a symbol, which marked the city. These are details – symbolic dragons, including those in the new trail, they can bring us closer to the city, they can help us turn "space" it into a friendly and familiar "place".



Fig. 26-27. People's interactions with dragons

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1825538574641708&set=pcb.1825538597975039>

From the semiotic perspective, the most important question is: how does the discussed project deal with the cultural symbol itself? In Europe, a dragon as a permanent motif appeared primarily in Romanesque art – on column capitals, keystones, and in the initials of books. The courtly art of Romanesque Europe adopted the motifs of fantastic animals via Persia and Byzantium, from areas once occupied by the ancient kingdoms of Babylon and Assyria [Firlet 1996, p. 113]. Captured in a stone sculpture or painting, the scary beast was thus tamed, and its image acquired a magical, apotropaic meaning. The word “apotropaic” comes from the Greek word *apotropaïos* (“to ward off”) for averting evil and misfortune. For that reason, the images of dragons were usually placed near a building’s entrance points, particularly doorways, windows, and fireplaces, to protect inhabitants and visitors from evil spirits. Today, a dragon tamed into a souvenir mascot or gadget is said to bring good luck. However, there is an important difference between the former representation of the dragon and the contemporary one. In the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance era the more dangerous the beast was depicted, the greater its power. The modern trend goes in the opposite direction: the dragon becomes small and even ostentatiously harmless. I would argue that this cultural change in Kraków manifested first in the souvenirs.

Souvenirs with the Wawel Dragon have been available in the historical center of Kraków for many years, and their popularity has increased especially in recent decades, along with the development of tourism. If you want to buy a souvenir, you'll probably see thousands of little dragons – stuffed toys, puppets, key rings, magnets. However, the new, benign image of the Wawel Dragon contrasts with its medieval representation. His former scary image was linked with his magical, apotropaic meaning – by his frightening look dragon was supposed to avert misfortune. Contemporary representation of dragon transformed the dangerous beast into a souvenir mascot or gadget. The beast is tamed in the new form like a wild animal in a trap and becomes a nice pet to hug.

The figurines designed for Dragons Trail reflect the cultural change in the politics of representation manifested in the souvenirs sold in Kraków. How does this transformation look like if we refer to the model of a sign by Ferdinand de Saussure? Swiss linguists offered a 'dyadic' or two-part model of the sign. He defined a sign as composed of a "signifier" (*signifiant*) and "signified" (*signifié*). A "signifier" is the form that a sign takes. A "signified" is the concept or idea that the signifier represents. The sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified [de Saussure 1983, p. 67]<sup>16</sup>. The sculptures constituting the Dragon Trail change both elements of medieval signs. A "signifier" is here a distorted version of the ancient form. The contemporary dragon is recognizable because of its characteristic features (head with a horn on the mouth, tail with crest and paws) however it does not look dangerous. There is an important difference – in the Middle Ages, the more menacing the depiction of the beast, the greater its power. The postmodern tendency is going in the opposite direction: the dragon is becoming ostentatiously small and harmless. Of course, this different signifier also influences the new signified. The original idea behind the old form is replaced by other concepts. Their meaning is defined by the different attributes of every sculpture constituting the new route. An attribute is an item thanks to which you can recognize a person: e.g. attributes of gods in Greek and Roman mythology Greek (the lightning is an attribute of Jupiter, the sickle of the harvest goddess Ceres). An attribute may also

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<sup>16</sup> Nowadays, while the basic model by de Saussure is commonly adopted, it tends to be a more materialistic model than that of Saussure himself (f.e. <https://media-studies.com/saussure/>). The signifier is now commonly interpreted as the material (or physical) form of the sign. For Saussure, both the signifier and the signified were purely 'psychological'. It was a concept and a sound pattern. The sound pattern is not a physical sound; it is the hearer's psychological impression of a sound [de Saussure 1983, p. 14-15].

be a characteristic tool, used for work by a professional group. This is the case in the majority of the new dragon sculptures. The Doctor Dragon wears the medical uniform and the hat with the sign of the Red Cross. He is also equipped with a stethoscope and a patient card. The Athlete Dragon standing at Marszałka Piłsudskiego street nr 27<sup>17</sup> carries a hula hoop circle. All these attributes enlarge the range of connotations and make a “signified” even more complex.

What are these socio-cultural transformations impacting the form and concept of the dragon change in its functioning as a symbol? In the European Middle Ages, the dragon functioned in a metaphysical and moral dimension, as evidenced by ancient bestiaries. They were books containing descriptions of animals, both real and fantastic. The descriptions were accompanied by moralizing explanations explaining the Christian symbolism of each beast. Bestiaries point out a parallel between a dragon and a devil: “As the dragon’s strength is not in its teeth but in its tail, the Devil, deprived of his strength, deceives with lies. The way in which the dragon attacks elephants represents the way the Devil attacks people, lying in wait along their path to heaven, wrapping them in his coils, and suffocating them with sin” [Dragon 2024].

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the moral dimension of a dragon was lost. In the contemporary representation of dragons in fantasy literature (f. e. Smaug from J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*), film (*Game of Thrones* series), and video games (*Elder Scrolls* series) the dragons are still powerful and destructive but they are no longer associated with the Devil. The little figures in the Dragon Trail are not only free from this connotation but also powerless. They function exclusively in the historical and cultural dimensions. Consequently, the range of connotations changes from the legendary an moral dimension to the historical one.

## Conclusion

Cultural heritage is Kraków’s greatest resource driving the city’s development. The Dragons Trail project also draws from this wealth. The Wawel Dragon incarnates in many different forms and spreads its presence far beyond its original location. The concept of this route shows that the residents have a creative attitude to the old symbols and their visual representation, but also reveals that their voices are not

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<sup>17</sup> We will meet him opposite the building of the “Sokół” Sports Society. The organization was established during the partitions. She popularized gymnastics among Polish society, but also tourism and paramilitary sports. Activists and athletes raised in Sokół later founded various sports clubs.

univocal. The advocates of tradition and the integrity of heritage in the center are cautious about non-conventional initiatives, especially in the UNESCO-protected area. In my opinion, the Kraków authorities' refusal to put the new dragon figurines in this restricted area not only protects its integrity but also promotes the exploration of the off-the-beaten-track areas. Their entertaining value and the use of digital technology have the potential to attract younger visitors and encourage them to explore less popular ways. Moreover, considering the educational aspect of The Dragons Trail, the sculptures situated outside of the Historical Center enable the tourists and the inhabitants to learn about the history of these places and promote off-beaten-track tourism. This will help relieve the city center of the tourist traffic? Time will tell.

The figurines do not copy the traditional representation of the dragon and do not retell its legendary story but they rather serve as a tool to tell other stories and facts linked with the areas outside of the UNESCO zone in Kraków. These less-known local stories provide an alternative to the well-known legend of the Wawel Dragon. This legend is one of the most representative Polish legends, while the stories narrated by The Dragons Trail do not have this national character. Besides, the little dragons refer to real historical figures, facts, and events. By telling these other stories linked with the city, the new trail takes part in the process of symbolization, or meaning-giving. This reflexive process is opposed to the processes of deterritorialization typical of a modern city, dominated by functional, and modernization optics. However, this is not the case in Kraków where the architecture created in different times and styles, coexists. Here, observing the city space, we engage in admiring its view (aesthetic, material values of the place/object) or getting acquainted with its markers [Pietrzak 2015, p. 286].

The development of the Dragons Trail track confirms that the offer for visiting historical places and spending free time in the contemporary post-modern city is becoming more and more diverse [Ashworth, Tunbridge 2011]. This case also poses further questions: should the former semiotic map of Kraków be revised and enlarged? Will the hegemonic code linked with the city center peacefully coexist with the negotiated code of participatory origin implemented in more peripheral parts of the urban landscape?

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## **Projekt Smoczego Szlaku jako alternatywnego szlaku tematycznego w kontekście zarządzania dziedzictwem Krakowa oraz ikonosfery miasta**

### **Abstrakt:**

W niniejszym opracowaniu zbadano realizację i znaczenie nowego projektu społecznego: Smoczy Szlak w Krakowie. Nowa trasa turystyczna powstał z inicjatywy mieszkańców miasta, którzy zgłosili pomysł, a następnie przegłosowali w Budżecie Obywatelskim Miasta Krakowa. Pomimo wsparcia społeczności lokalnej, pierwotna wersja nowego szlaku nie uzyskała zgody Wojewódzkiego Urzędu Ochrony Zabytków, który sprzeciwił się lokalizacji inwestycji, uznając ją za niezgodną z polityką miasta oraz wytycznymi UNESCO. W artykule zbadano przyczynę tych kontrowersji w kontekście zarządzania dziedzictwem Krakowa oraz rozwoju projektu pomimo napotykanych przeszkód. Zastosowano podejście oparte na metodach mieszanych, wykorzystując dane jakościowe z badań źródłowych oraz metodę obserwacji uczestniczącej. Ze wstępnych wyników badań wynika, że Smoczy Szlak oferuje jeszcze jedną trasę tematyczną, która przyciąga zarówno mieszkańców Krakowa, jak i turystów. Podążając szlakiem, zwiedzający mogą zobaczyć wiele mniej popularnych, ale ciekawych miejsc oraz poznać lokalne, mniej znane historie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Smoczy Szlak, Kraków, dziedzictwo, ikonosfera, szlak tematyczny