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**Roman Mazurkiewicz, *Deesis. Idea wstawienia Bogarodzicy i św. Jana Chrzciciela w kulturze średniowiecznej*,
Kraków 2012, 346 pp.**

There are books that have a significant influence on the direction of academic research, and, despite the passage of time, since the appearance of their first editions, constantly inspire it. For the research on late Middle Ages Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, a famous monograph presenting the societies of western Europe in the 14th and the 15th centuries, is this kind of book. For the researchers of the Age of Enlightenment the crucial work is Paul Hazard's *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century from Montesquieu to Lessing*, in which this famous professor of Collège de France formulated a hypothesis saying that this century put Christianity on trial and charged Christ himself, in an attempt to bring the Cross down, erase the idea of God's communion with man, the idea of revelation, to destroy the religious concept of life. The afore – mentioned titles are merely examples of a number of important scholarly texts in the field of European Humanities that were created in the 20th century.

I would like to include in this category of writing a book that is extraordinary in every aspect: *Deesis. The Intercession of the Mother of God and St. John the Baptist in the Medieval Culture*, written by Roman Mazurkiewicz. Its author, a historian of Old Polish Culture and Literature, a professor of the Polish Philology Institute at the Pedagogical University

in Krakow, is a well known researcher of the Medieval religious literature in Poland. He has published more than one hundred academic and editorial papers, including a number of books. In the times of all – powerful electronic media it needs to be mentioned that he is also a creator and editor of the educational portal 'Staropolska.pl', which has an impeccable opinion among specialists and is quite popular among Internet users, and has been awarded numerous prizes, also by foreign institutions.

In his preface to the third edition of *Deesis*, which was published at the end of 2012, the author reveals his satisfaction with the fact that this specialised academic monograph, with an incomprehensible, strange – sounding title, has been reprinted for the third time. His work, regardless of the passage of time (its first edition was issued in 1994), not only remains in demand, but also influences current research concerning the religious culture of Medieval Poland and Europe. Suffice it to say, that after the first edition of the book the term *Deesis* appeared in the form of an entry in the expanded edition of *Słownik terminów literackich* [*The Dictionary of Literary Terms*] (1998), and the book itself was put on the list of recommended readings at some courses of Humanistic Studies.

As the author indicates, the Greek term *déesis* stands for 'prayer', 'supplication'. It appears with this meaning in the Gospel according to Luke, in the scene in which the birth of John is announced, when Zechariah hears the angel say: "your prayer has been heard" (Lk 1:13). The term was used much earlier by Ancient Greeks, e.g. Plato and Demosthenes. In the writings of Church Fathers the word *déesis* meant supplication brought to God, with the intercession of a saint, on behalf of the faithful. Apart from Jesus Christ, the only true Mediator between God and men, the Virgin Mother of God and John the Baptist were thought to be the best advocates of sinful mankind. Together with Christ, they constitute a triad of the most important characters in the history of Salvation, crowning the hierarchy of angels and saints in the heavenly reality. This particular motif was first presented in the Byzantine liturgy, later in iconography, which is the interpretation of the content of images. In the history of art *Deesis* stands for a traditional iconic representation of Christ in Majesty, flanked by the Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist, sometimes accompanied by other saints and angels. Mary and John are

shown raising their hands in supplication on behalf of the people. These two research fields: “text and image”, “literature and art” form the frame of the original and incredibly interesting book of R. Mazurkiewicz. The first part of the book (*Tradycja antyku chrześcijańskiego i średniowiecza* [*The Tradition of Ancient and Medieval Christianity*]) has a general, synthetic and reviewing character. With great knowledge and skill, the author analyses theological premises and the historical process of shaping the idea of Mary’s and John the Baptist’s intercession on the basis of the Bible, Biblical apocrypha, the writings of Church Fathers, as well as the cult and liturgy, religious poetry and iconography.

The author gives an interesting account of the change in the perception of John the Baptist and his role in the work of salvation. About the 5th century, the Lord’s Predecessor appears in biblical commentaries and prayers not only as a mediator between the Messiah coming to this world and man expecting his arrival, but also in a reverse relation – as a mediator between sinful man and Christ. With the intercession of “none greater among those born of women” (cf. Mt 11:11) the faithful started pleading with the Saviour in order to receive graces necessary for salvation. The patristic thought was predominant in this process, accompanied however by the spontaneous development of the cult of John the Baptist as the greatest, right after Virgin Mary, advocate of sinners, additionally stimulated by the monastic spirituality of the period and the cult of John the Baptist’s relics. According to Mazurkiewicz, the liturgy, the cult and the thought of Church Fathers in the first seven centuries of Christianity created a theological basis which was strong enough to let John the Baptist establish a position of the advocate of sinful mankind, second only to Virgin Mary (p. 63).

The second part of Mazurkiewicz’s book (*Deesis w kulturze średniowiecznej Polski* [*Deesis in the culture of Medieval Poland*]) focuses on the idea of intercession of the Mother of the Lord and John the Baptist in the Polish Medieval culture and its character is more analytical, philologically – interpretational, especially in the chapters devoted to *Bogurodzica*¹. At the same time, it is in this part of the book that the author introduced most

¹ *Bogurodzica* (*Mother of God*) is the title of the oldest Polish hymn.

significant changes in comparison with two former editions of *Deesis*, taking into account the most recent linguistic and literary publications on *carmen patrium*.

Indicating that *Bogurodzica* is the best evidence of the presence of *deesis* in the history of Polish Medieval literary works, the author emphasises that the relation between the iconographic presentation of the topic of *Deesis* (e.g. in the Collegiate Church in Tum, near Łęczyca) and *Bogurodzica* can only be perceived in terms of their parallelism, and not any direct genetic correlation. The creation of *carmen patrium*, probably around the 13th or the 14th century, can only prove that the idea of *deesis* was widespread at that time, and that it was not inspired by its particular artistic presentation. Mazurkiewicz also points out that *Bogurodzica*, the best evidence of the existence of *deesis* in the context of both art and theology, could have been created during the period when the Christian west gradually began to “forget” about St. John’s tradition of the first millennium, and western iconography of *Deesis* began to lose its clear ideological appeal and popularity. With all that in mind, the place, time, as well as the language in which *Bogurodzica* was created, gain a truly symbolic significance.

It is worth mentioning that the graphic design of the work presented here, published by Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych *Universitas*, was meticulously planned. The book has an interesting cover with the reproduction of the Staurothek from Limburg (about 965 AD), and forty illustrations presenting the history of *Deesis* in Christian iconography – from the enamel icon in Martvili, Georgia, to *Deesis* in Michelangelo’s *The Last Judgement* in the Vatican Sistine Chapel. The summaries of the book in English, French and Russian, as well as the Index of names, are also included.

I sincerely recommend this book as a great way to become familiar with the history of joint intercession of Virgin Mary and John the Baptist, thoroughly reconstructed by the author of *Deesis*.