

Piotr L. Wilczyński

JOACHIM LELEWEL'S GEOGRAPHICAL IDEAS AND HERITAGE

Abstract

During the IGU Congress in 1934 held in Warsaw there was presented the project of new international scientific organization, namely Joachim Lelewel Society, which was to deal with history and philosophy of geography. Unfortunately this decision was not carried into effect because of incoming global conflict and World War II that disabled the necessary friendly contacts between potential members.

Joachim Lelewel (1786-1861) was one of the most important founders of history of geography. This field was his inspiration and source of research interests. Lelewel understood that the condition of geography's development is both the increase in theoretical concepts necessary to comprehend and describe the Earth surface, and the extension of geographical horizon due to exploration. According to his views, the pure description and map making is not sufficient to be called geography. This is because geography is a special kind of knowledge which embraces all the terrestrial phenomena, and this could be substantiated on the basis of history of geographical ideas. Moreover, an exact recognition of geography's development is the best basis for future research. Lelewel has expressed his philosophy of the field mainly in his works concerning the development of ancient

- 95 -

and medieval geography. Those works gave him respect of such known persons like Karl Ritter, Hermann Wagner or Lucien Gallois.

The purpose of this short paper is to show the Lelevel's main ideas and concepts concerning the essence of geography. This is necessary since this XIXth century scholar, who became the patron of the international scientific society, remains rather not known among contemporary scientists. The additional aim is to show, that his original ideas could be useful from the point of view of contemporary geographical problems and interests.

Keywords:

Joachim Lelewel, history of geographical thought, philosophy of geography, geographer, historical geography



Fig. 1: Joachim Lelewel (born March 22nd, 1786 in Warsaw, died May 29th, 1861 in Paris).¹

1. Origin, early years, education and professions of Joachim Lelewel

Joachim Lelewel's origin roots back to the Austrian noble family von Loelhöffel. His ancestors moved to Prussia in the seventeenth century, to save their property before the Ottoman invasion. They obtained Prussian citizenship under the name Loelhöffel von Löwensprung. Lelewel's grandfather Heinrich moved to Poland and was a professor at the universities of Vilnius and Warsaw. His father Karl Loelhöffel von Löwensprung became Polish royal treasurer. He received Polish citizenship with the change of the name to Karol Lelewel² (Więckowska, 1980).

After finishing school run by the Piarist Order in Warsaw, Lelewel studied mathematics, natural history, geography and the classics at the University in Vilnius since 1804 (Janeczek, 2005). Young

¹ Source: "Lelewel, Joachim" in the Polish National Library / The National Digital Library Polona.

² Pronunciation: lelevel.

Lelewel was highly influenced by his professor of ancient literature Godfryd Ernest Groddeck. He inspired Lelewel to research ancient geography, as well as to search for texts focused on Slavic and Baltic lands in the works of ancient Greek and Roman geographers, and then also among the works of the Arabs. After graduating in 1808 he launched the first lectures in Poland on the history of geography in Krzemieniec College. A few years later he moved to Warsaw, where he took a job as a curator of the library, and was a member of parliament. In 1815, he became a member of the Friends of Sciences Society in Warsaw. He was also the founder of a scientific and literary journal "Tygodnik Wileński."³

In 1820 he received his doctorate at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. In 1821 he moved back to Vilnius, where he worked as a history professor at Vilnius University. However, due to his anti-Russian views, he lost his job in 1824. He was already well known and famous (Janeczek, 2005).

After returning to Warsaw he continued his political activities and scientific research. During the November Uprising, he served as Minister of Religious Affairs and Enlightenment of Poland. After the fall of the uprising he went on exile to Paris, where they expelled him in 1833 for his political activities. Then he settled in Brussels, where he

³ The Vilnius Weekly.

lived in voluntary poverty, while devoting himself to scientific research until his death in 1861 (Olszewicz, 1967).

2. Achievements

The main Lelewel's areas of interest were global geography and history. However he also dealt with politics and cartography.

In the field of science, to his merits belongs that, he is the first who calculated the middle of European continent. It lies between Białystok and Vilnius accordingly (Zawadzka, 2008). Lectures and works created by him, so called Lelewel's School, focused on geographical and historical processes, had a major impact on the development of Polish science and education (Więckowska, 1980). Other well-known geographers, such as Alexander von Humboldt, who wrote about Lelewel as "erudite of historical geography" (von Humboldt & Ideler, 1836, p. 395), relied and based on his works. Karl Ritter, was fascinated by Lelewel's research and translated some works of Lelewel to German, his native language. Skelton who compared ancestors of historical geography: Lelewel, Jomard and Santarém with each other, pointed the Pole as a main researcher. In Skelton's words: "...of three scholars, it was Lelewel, working with demonic energy and near fanaticism, who provided his atlas with the most penetrating and complete accompanying text, to which the map reproductions are subsidiary" (Skelton, 1972, p. 53). Lelewel's works are still valid today. Rzepa believes that "at the present time, Lelewel's

- 99 -

works are a starting point for research in the fields of the history of geographical thought, cartography and historical geography as well” (Rzepa, 1980, p. 105). In addition, Lelewel created a huge collection of books, maps and atlases. He wrote about it to his brother in one of his letters: „neither the Warsaw Library (...) nor the old Vilnius Library has ever had such a collection as I have put together” (Lelewel, 1878-1879, p. 360). It was partially destroyed and plundered by the Red Army’s pillaging units in 1939 (Mikoś, 1984). The Lelewel’s unique skills and knowledge were described by contemporary Polish poets like Adam Mickiewicz in a poetic composition “Do Joachima Lelewela”⁴ (Mickiewicz, 1822).

Knowledge, wisdom and charismatic personality gave Lelewel an incredible political support, especially among young people rebelling against the contemporary political situation. He expressed his views in a deep Polish patriotism and promoted republican views. His republicanism, however, had not originated either from the achievements of the founding fathers of the United States, nor in the ideologues of the French Revolution. He proclaimed his own view based on the need for rehabilitation and return to the medieval Polish tradition of Slavic-based selfgoverning rallies. With these views in 1824 he was sentenced to lose the title of professor. Furthermore, his brilliant career as a politician was ruined by the fall of November

⁴ Tribute to Joachim Lelewel.

Uprising (1830-1831). During the uprising he was a member of the Administrative Council and the National Government. At that time he founded the Patriotic Society - a radical republican party with a very progressive program of social reforms. As its head he held in Warsaw a huge demonstration in honor of the Decembrists in January 25th, 1831. Probably he is an author of famous revolutionary motto of that period "For our freedom and yours." On October 5th, 1831, along with other leaders of the uprising, he fled from the occupied country, and never returned. In Switzerland, along with others, on the framework of Pan-Slavic ideas, he created an informal movement of Polish democratic-republicans. It was called "Young Poland" and he became its leader. This organization was associated with the "Young Europe" of G. Mazzini. In addition he became a head of the Union of the Polish Emigrants Organizations in 1837. The main political achievements of Lelewel include, inter alia, a successful organization and management of the first huge pan-Slavic Congress in Prague during the so-called Spring of Nations in 1848 (Chrzanowski, 1946).

Lelewel was also a major contributor to the development of cartography. He created more than 250 maps, primarily of historical geography of antiquity and the Middle Ages. He was the first, who collected and described geographical knowledge of ancient and medieval geographers and explorers, adding to that work his own maps. His research was a broad synthesis of the geographical horizons development in those eras. The biggest Lelewel's work is *Geographie*

- 101 -

du moyen âge.⁵ It is five volumes of research work in the field of cartography. The first one, dealing with this as single scientific discipline, and its sources, derived from antiquity, describing the evolution and regression periods in development. The main theory of this work was that that the Arabs, based on their precise astronomical observations, and the Italians and Catalans thanks to the widespread use of the magnetic needle independently reached a very high level in the art of drawing maps. The proof of this theory was mentioned above. It was the world's first collection of ancient and medieval maps and comparative analysis of influences, similarities, and borrowings. Lelewel showed the relationship between ancient Greek maps, and medieval Arabic ones. He also proved the independent development of the Catalan and Italian medieval cartographical schools (Mikoś, 1984).

3. Lelewel's ideas and their impact on geography

Joachim Lelewel was an advocate of geographical and historical research involving both, an empirical approach and philosophical interpretations. It enhanced the traditional scientific study by perceptions and awareness of the researcher. Such view was based on the contemporary theories of knowledge of Kant, Ferguson, Rousseau, Herder, and Fichte. But various forms of whole-sensory

⁵ Geography of Middle Ages.

knowledge acquiring, as a methods of research, were mainly an exponent of Immanuel Kant thoughts. Konigsberg philosopher and his theory was fiercely defended by Lelewel in a polemic with Jan Śniadecki, Polish philosopher, mathematician, astronomer and geographer. Therefore, he regarded that geographical methodology should have been based on Kant's epistemology and the idea of synopsis. Lelewel claimed that the geographical study should be based on all fields of knowledge. Analyzing regional classical literature, the religious studies, jurisprudence, and even mapping numismatics, and all other fields at the same time was the most proper way of geographical research according to Lelewel, and philosophical thought of Kant. It should also be pointed, that Lelewel did not used to focus only on geography, because there is no division between geography, history and other sciences, all treated synthetically, according to the Kantian paradigm. Kant's epistemology, which disseminated among scholars of that period, is visible in almost all Lelewel's works (Janeczek, 2005).

Joachim Lelewel - undoubtedly the most influential Polish geographer of the early nineteenth century, an erudite scholar and a noble man, was also a world-famous developer of the history of geography and historical geography. According to the above statement, there is one of the most important Lelewel's expressions that can be found in the preface to his first published work on historical geography: "the main considerations which must be

addressed in the history of the geography are not only discoveries, but any ideas and ways of describing recognizable lands” (Lelewel, 1814). He was the author of many geographical books. He made geography much more popular. And he was a famous cartographer too (Zawadzka, 2008)

Lelewel’s thought in geography is giving emphasis on the history and geography synthesis. This Lelewel-shaped concept was introduced in the first of his geographical works (Więckowska, 1980). Synthetic thinking in geographical research, which originated from Kantian epistemology, could be considered while reading his works. Lelewel didn’t despise even the poetry, often regarding it, as a geographical description. Especially when he analyzed ancient works, he must have looked for not only maps and their descriptions, but also all other possible sources of information. His publications such as *Geographie du moyen âge* is still a valuable source of knowledge not only about European geography in the period presented there, but also the geography of the Arabs. He published numerous articles in journals in German, French and Russian languages. This scientific activity caused that such personalities as Ritter, von Humboldt, Wagner, and Gallois regarded him as great man and respectable geographer, even though their views on the geography were not always the same.

Since Lelewel’s death, works on the history of geography and historical geography have progressed far forward in different

countries. Some of his theories have fallen. However large part of them still remains valid. On the eve of World War II, there was unanimously adopted resolution, during the International Geographical Union Congress held in Warsaw, to establish a scientific association of historical geographers and historians of geography, called "The Lelewel Society." There was no surprise among those present on the proposed denomination. The war not allowed to complete the project. After the conflict, Lelewel and his heritage became increasingly forgotten (Olszewicz, 1967).

Currently, Lelewel and his works on historical geography are not too well known in the world. Although his ideas begin to experience a renaissance. The evidence of this process is advertising the Lelewel patronage for facilities devoted to science and education, as the room in the library of Vilnius University, and numerous primary and secondary schools. Besides, the pre-war International Geographical Union project is completed, and "The Lelewel Society"⁶ is set up (Wilczyński, 2009). This illustrates the return of the scholar and his concepts towards geography at a time when this branch of science is looking for new ways of development.

⁶ See: www.lelewel.pl

4. Appendix: the most influential works of Joachim Lelewel

Year	Original title	English title	Publisher	Place of publication
1814	<i>Pisma pomniejszych geograficzno-historyczne</i>	Minor geohistorical writings	Karol Lelewel	Warsaw
1818	<i>Badania starożytności we względzie geografii - część naukowa</i>	Research on ancient geography – scientific part	J. Zawadzki – typograf Imperatorskiego Uniwersytetu,	Vilnius
1821	<i>Odkrycia Kartagów i Greków na Oceanie Atlantyckim</i>	Carthaginian and Greek discoveries on Atlantic Ocean	Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk w Warszawie	Warsaw
1830	<i>Atlas do dziejow polskich z dwunastu krajobrazow zlozony</i>	Atlas of Polish history consisted of twelve landscapes	no data	Warsaw
1835	<i>Numismatique du Moyen-Age considérée sous le Rapport du Type</i>	Coins of the Middle Ages - typology	Librairie Polonaise	Paris
1836	<i>Pythéas de Marseille et la géographie de son temps</i>	Pytheas of Marseilles and the geography of his times	Chez l'éditeur	Brussels
1843	<i>Guillebert de Lannoy et ses voyages en</i>	Guillebert de Lannoy and his travels in 1413,	A. Vandale	Brussels

	<i>1413, 1414 et 1421</i>	1414 and 1421		
1844	<i>Historie de la Pologne</i>	History of Poland	Librairie polonaise	Paris, Lille
1850-1857	<i>Géographie du moyen âge</i>	Geography of Middle Ages	Ve et J. Pilliet	Brussels
1859	<i>Geografia. Opisanie krajów polskich</i>	Geography. Description of Polish lands.	JK Żupański	Poznan
1861	<i>Kopernika, tudzież i innych astronomów polskich w geografii zasługa</i>	Merits of Copernicus and other Polish astronomers in the field of geography	Merzbach	Poznan
1861	<i>Trzy konstytucje polskie; 1791, 1807, 1815</i>	Three Polish Constitutions: 1791, 1807, 1815	JK Żupański	Poznan
1878-1879	<i>Listy Joachima Lelewela</i>	Correspondence of Joachim Lelewel	JK Żupański	Poznan

References

Chrzanowski I., (1946). J. Lelewel. Człowiek i pisarz. Czytelnik, Warsaw.

Humboldt A. von, Ideler J. L. (1836). Kritische Untersuchungen über die historische Entwicklung der geogr. Kenntnisse von der neuen Welt, vol. 1. Nicolai, Berlin.

Janeczek S. (2005). Lelewel. In Powszechna encyklopedia filozofii, vol. VI. Lublin: Polskie Towarzystwo św. Tomasza z Akwinu.

Lelewel J. (1814). Pisma pomniejszych geograficzno-historyczne. K. Lelewel, Warsaw.

Lelewel J. (1878-1879). Listy Joachima Lelewela. J.K. Żupański, Poznan.

Mickiewicz A. (1822). Do Joachima Lelewela. Wilno.

Mikoś M. J. (1984). Joachim Lelewel: Polish Scholar and Map Collector. *The Map Collector*, vol. 1, 20-24.

Olszewicz B. (1967). Joachim Lelewel. In *Dziewięć wieków geografii polskiej – wybitni geografowie polscy*, ed. Olszewicz B., pp. 213-230. Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna.

Rzepa Z. (1980). Joachim Lelewel 1786-1861. In *Geographers: Bibliographical Studies*, vol. 4, eds. Freeman T. W., Pinchemel P., London: Mansell Publishing.

Skelton R. A. (1972). *Maps: A Historical survey of Their Study and Collecting*. Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Więckowska H. (1980). Joachim Lelewel. Uczony – polityk – człowiek, Ilustr. *Kalendarium życia i dzieła*. Czytelnik, Warsaw.

Wilczyński, W. J. (2009). On the Necessity of the History of Geographical Thought. In *Bulletin of Geography: Socio-economic series*, vol. 11, 5-14.

Zawadzka D. (2008). Lelewel, czyli przez Białystok do Wilna i Brukseli. In *Nasz Uniwersytet*, vol. 5, p. 21.