

THE WAWEL HILL

The Dragon of Wawel

It is said that at some point between 600 and 800 A.D., the place where Krakow now stands was chosen by one of the Slavic tribes. It was not an accident, for ages ago people mostly looked for places they could comfortably inhabit and easily defend. That was exactly what they found on a wide open plain across which the river Vistula flew quietly and majestically, with a tall, rocky limestone hill at its bend, to be called Wawel later on.

A defensive castle with a small town at its foot was soon built on the hill. Its king's name was Krak and such is the origin of the current name of the city of Krakow.

Wawel hill today does not seem too tall, however, at the moment of its construction Krak's castle towered over the area, the rocks it was built on very high, full of crevices and deep, hidden caves. In one of the caves there was a lair of a giant dragon. The dragon would either nap or feed on his reserves until humans created comfortable domiciles around his den. Or maybe the story was that he arrived when herds of farm animals appeared in the area. Irrespective of the circumstances, one day at dawn he appeared at the Vistula, and from that point on he would devour cattle and sheep on a daily basis. It is also believed that he used to capture young girls, having developed a special taste for virgins. The local people were afraid to leave their homes. The town succumbed to fear as some of the settlers started to think of leaving.

King Krak understood that if the dragon were undefeated he would have to abandon the town he built and lose the already settled lands. He called upon his warriors and the bravest knights and offered his daughter's hand as well as his kingdom in return for slaying the dragon.

Chronicles fail to mention how many knights attempted to fight the dragon albeit none of them managed to win. The dwellers lived in growing anxiety, hopelessly watching the dragon devour another animal and capture whoever was left of the virgins. King Krak was on the verge of abandoning the town when a young cobbler's apprentice, in Krakow to learn the craft of making shoes for its citizens – his name is said to have been Szewczyk ('Little Cobbler') Skuba – appeared in front of him. Little cobbler told the king how much he wanted to marry the princess and slay the dragon to that end; however, in order to do that he needed a lot of sulfur as well as sheepskin and mutton grease. King Krak ordered for the little cobbler's demands to be fulfilled. Skuba locked himself in his room and spent the whole night diligently sewing together the supplied skins, stuffing them with sulfur and greasing the wool. Before dawn, he summoned the king's guards to help him carry the huge ram to the bank of the Vistula. The dragon woke up at dawn as usual, came out of his

cave and gladly swallowed the prepared meal. To his surprise, instead of feeling full he felt a burning sensation in his belly which later on turned into burning fire, its heat rising with each passing second. The sulfur was scorching his bowels. Looking to extinguish the flames, he rushed towards the Vistula River and began to drink greedily. However, since the flame would not fade, he kept drinking and drinking the Vistula water, and his belly kept bulging and bulging until it burst, filled beyond the limit.

The news of the slaying of the dragon made king Krak happy, and little cobbler Skuba became the hero to the people of Krakow, joyous with regained peace. The princess was also glad, for she thought it was good to have a smart and industrious husband.

Until today, in the Krakow dialect, the word 'skubany' is used for people good at coping with difficult situations referring to the ingenuity of Skuba the little cobbler.

The dragon left behind a huge empty cave called Smocza Jama ('dragon's den'). You can admire it while visiting the Wawel Castle and see how he made his lair there. From the riverside, the children of Krakow gather around his statue which, every once in a while, breathes fire and scares the young ones away.

The Dragon of Wawel is today the most famous and popular mascot of Krakow. No tourist leaves without taking one home.

(After visiting the dragon's den, you have to see the whole Wawel – the crown jewel of Polish culture, the pride of the nation)