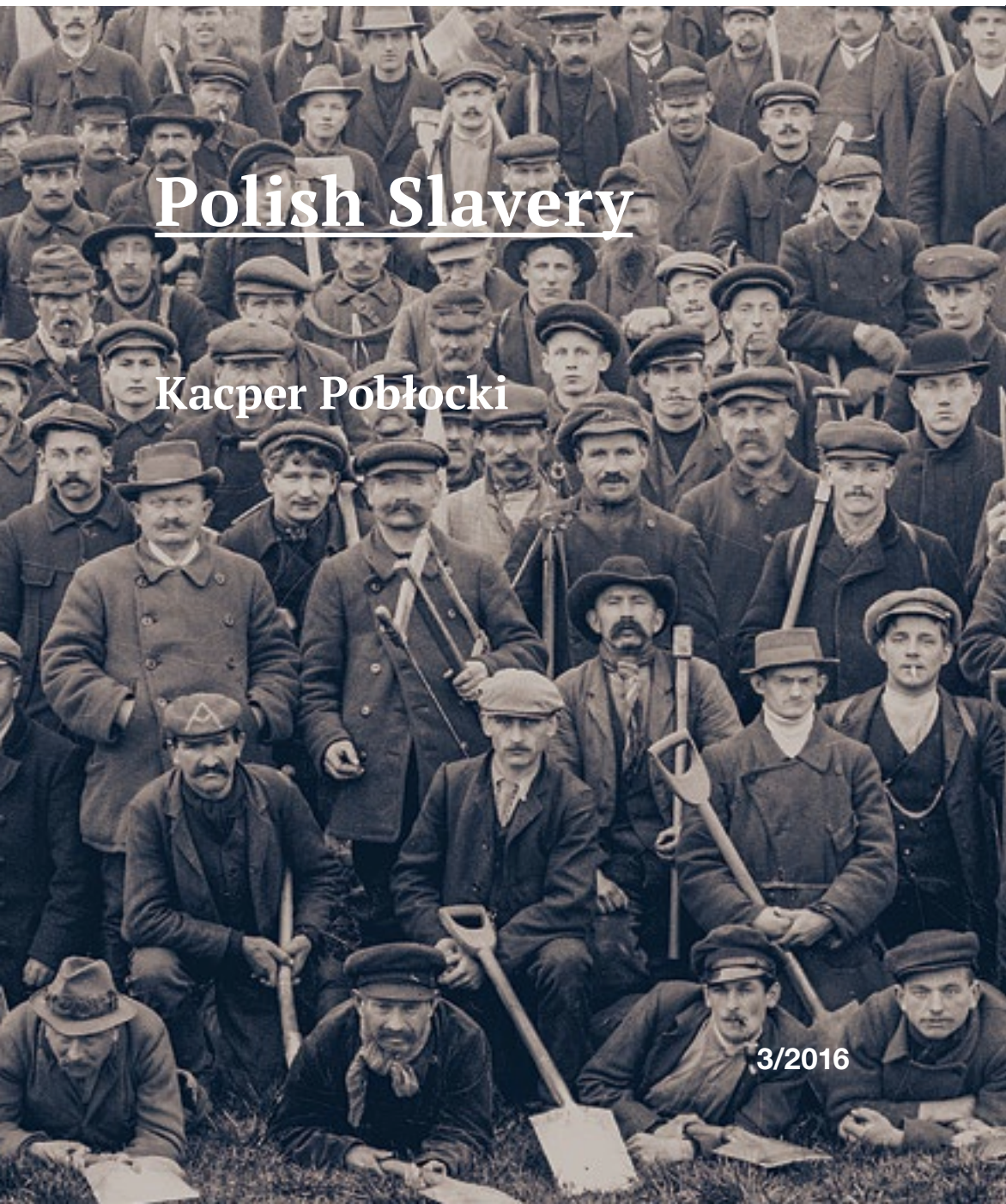


# CzasKultury/English

## Polish Slavery

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It is becoming increasingly common to hear voices that claim the feudal system was a type of slavery.<sup>1</sup> This comparison obviously isn't related to the ancient, but the Atlantic-type of slavery.<sup>2</sup> It is true that both systems emerged at a similar time. The beginnings of slavery in the Americas, similarly to the Polish feudal system, date back to the 16th century. According to Sidney Mintz, the Caribbean became a palimpsest which emerged as a result of subsequent waves of conquest by in fact basically all the colonial powers in Europe. Puerto Rico was already colonized in 1509 (and never gained independence; currently it is "an organized unincorporated territory" of the United States and its inhabitants are US citizens, yet are deprived of many rights; for instance they cannot vote in general elections), Haiti in 1492, Jamaica in 1494, and Barbados in 1627.<sup>3</sup> However, as many as 80% of all slaves

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1 Compare e.g. "Chłopi swoich panów, A. Leszczyński talks to M.Kopczyński," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 25.10.2013, [http://wyborcza.pl/alehistoria/1,134744,14840914,Chłopi\\_swoich\\_panow.html?disableRedirects=true](http://wyborcza.pl/alehistoria/1,134744,14840914,Chłopi_swoich_panow.html?disableRedirects=true) (30.06.2016).

2 I refer to the Atlantic rather than American slavery since this system was based on combining three remote territories into one coherent whole, while every one of them was located on a different coast of the Atlantic: Great Britain, Western Africa and the Americas, especially the Caribbean. That is why it is the Atlantic rather than particular countries that is the adequate (spatial) point of analysis of modern slavery in this part of the world. Compare P. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London 1993.

3 S.W. Mintz, *Three Ancient Colonies: Caribbean Themes and Variations*, Cambridge 2010, p. 43.

who moved over the Atlantic were transported between 1701 and 1850.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, Atlantic slavery was flourishing in the times when the feudal system in Eastern Europe was being tightened. It is the profits from slavery that constituted the financial basis of American development in the 19th century.<sup>5</sup> Both systems disappeared at a similar point in time – in the United States, slavery was abolished in 1865, while serfdom in Russia vanished in 1861.<sup>6</sup>

### **Proud Peripheries**

Obviously, both systems were extremely brutal, unjust and inhuman. For this reason comparing them is morally valid. Thanks to that, we are also able to argue with an idyllic and paternalistic vision of the Polish past, when allegedly a national consensus was dominant and the relations between classes were harmonious. It was already one of the first Polish ethnographers, Łukasz Gołębiowski (1773–1849), who explained that although serfdom was unjust, it was the result of the natural construction of the world. In 1830, he claimed that “whoever believes that Polish folk [peasants] were slaves or believes they were unhappy is wrong or is making their judgement based on appearances (like foreign papers did) as they are accusing our ancestors or us of barbarism.”<sup>7</sup>

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4 E.R Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*, Berkeley 1990, p. 196.

5 T. Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge 2014, p. 159–163.

6 This comparison was conducted in the most systematic way in: P. Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom*, Cambridge 1990.

7 A. Leszczyński, *Skok w nowoczesność: polityka wzrostu w krajach peryferyjnych 1943–1980*, Warsaw 2013, p. 97.

An objection to putting serfdom and slavery on the same line and a claim that the nobility was “father and guardian” (Gołębiowski’s term) for the peasants, according to Adam Leszczyński, resulted from proud peripheries: “a belief that we might be poorer, but more noble and of higher moral values, and, in addition, we live more in accordance with nature, did not only serve as an excuse for their own backwardness [but also] as a tool for the protection of national pride.”<sup>8</sup>

Gołębiowski was not right claiming that adding the stigma of slavery to serfdom had its exclusive origins abroad. It was Piotr Skarga who frankly spoke about the feudal system during his parliamentary sermons in 1597: “There is no other state where subjects and ploughmen were oppressed to such an extent [...] the folk is under their lords like grain under a millstone. If they are not bought or captured, if they are Polish by blood, not Turks or Tatars, if they are Christian, why do they suffer in slavery? Why don’t we use them as hired labor rather than slaves? [...] We are faithful Christians, Poles of this nation who were never slaves. With no right given do we enslave and [treat] them as purchased cattle.”<sup>9</sup>

Peasants would see their situation in a similar way. When one Protestant asked a peasant in 1595 (that is long before the feudal system reached its deepest point in brutality) why he wouldn’t abandon the Catholic faith, he simply explained: “Do we feel like doing anything in slavery? We

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8 Ibidem, p. 98.

9 A. Brückner, *Dzieje Kultury Polskiej*, v. 2, Kraków, 1930, p. 39.

have no time to think about God. Lords will invent some work for us to do on Sundays as well. From this nasty slavery neither God nor the devil will save us. By our lords we are less respected than cattle. They call us *dog's blood* but have less respect for us than for their dogs. It is our fate to suffer in this and the other world.”<sup>10</sup>

The Atlantic slavery, studied in depth by researchers, has become a part of global or universal history.<sup>11</sup> Relatively little, however, is known about serfdom, especially about the everyday lives of male and female serfs. Our national history is based on the noble narrative, on the one hand, and the history of independent peasants on the other. It is symptomatic that national folk costumes originate from the regions where serfdom was nonexistent, i.e. the Kurpie region, the Łowickie Duchy or Podhale. The most important novel about the Polish village: *Chłopi* [The Peasants], for which the author was awarded the Nobel Prize, takes place in Lipce, a village dominated by independent and relatively rich peasants. It is so despite the fact that Reymont, when collecting materials for the book, didn't stay in Lipce at all. He was living nearby in Krosnowa which was a farming village. However, as Adam Grzymała-Siedlecki put it: “One could not help but notice how the inhabitants of Krosnowa were still covered with the sedimentation of the feudal mentality that had not yet evaporate. Hence, for Reymont, a peasant from Krosnowa was no different than a peasant from hundreds of other Polish villages.” At the same time, in Lipce, with its existing rent law, there was

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> See S. Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti i historia uniwersalna*, Warsaw 2014.

“a possibility to breed ‘a yeoman’, an aristocratic peasant” who became the main character in his novel.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the experience of Lipce was an exception that turned into the rule. The dominant perception of our collective past was fundamentally falsified.

What was “the feudal mentality” we know first of all from this type of patronizing remarks, even though Grzymała-Siedlecki himself claimed that it was shared by the majority of Poles. Information is incomplete, dispersed and often away from the main narrative; like the one about why Reymont chose Lipce for the main place of his story. Since we don’t know how to speak about the feudal experience we use analogies with the Atlantic slavery in order to record the fate of the feudal peasant in our collective (not just national but human) history. Even though this comparison works in the moral dimension, in the cognitive sense it covers more than it explains. Claiming that the feudal system was a type of “Polish slavery” is like saying that the Polish footballer Radosław Majdan and the singer Doda are “the Polish David and Victoria Beckham” or that the actor Maciej Zakościelny is “the Polish Brad Pitt.” In this way, we learn very little about Majdan or Zakościelny and only for a moment do we discard the nasty feeling that we are people with no history. If universal history is being written elsewhere by someone else and about other people, then we include ourselves in it simply by finding local phenomena that correspond to the global phenomena. In this sense, Gołębiowski is not the only one who is

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12 S. Jarecka-Kimłowska, *Zanim Lipce stały się Reymontowskie*, Warsaw 1989, p. 10.

motivated by proud peripheries as it also constituted the ground for comparisons between slavery and serfdom.

### **Meanders of Historic Continuity**

When speaking of serfdom as “Polish slavery,” we are making an attempt to add our story to the global history of oppression. However, without understanding the specifics of serfdom we will no longer be able to settle the accounts with its stigma. And there are more differences between these systems than similarities. On the one hand, the Atlantic slavery was highly financialized (meaning that slaves were financial assets, i.e. collateral for the whole complex system of loans and dues), and, on the other hand, serfdom took place in the times of a strong deficit.<sup>13</sup> We know the records which listed prices for peasants – in most cases it was approximately 120 grzywnas for a man and 60 grzywnas for a woman. Moreover, in 1631, plebeian price *per head* was established in this respect and the price didn’t change until the partitions. However, “changes in the value of money resulting from the political and economic disaster, according to Józef Matuszewski, didn’t affect the price of a peasant at all.” That is why the price per head was not a price in the marketing sense. “I don’t think there is another product like this one that for over 150 years wouldn’t be subject to fluctuations in prices.”<sup>14</sup> Obviously, it does not mean that peasants didn’t “change hands,” but this process took place with the use of other mechanisms (e.g. the institution of “gifts” based on the principle of reciprocity)

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13 W. Kula, *Teoria ekonomiczna ustroju feudalnego*, Warsaw 1983, p. 160–163.

14 J. Matuszewski, *Czy handlowano chłopami w Rzeczypospolitej szlacheckiej?*

“Sprawozdania Wrocławskiego Towarzystwa Naukowego,” Wrocław 1960, p. 71–74.

rather than barter trade or especially the system of trading debts. In this sense, the infamous Zong slave ship massacre (in 1781) which triggered the process of the abolition would have been unthinkable in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. When on the high sea the captain of the ship decided to throw 132 slaves overboard, as Ian Baucom brilliantly analyzed, it was not just an act of pure thoughtless cruelty but cold calculation. He simply calculated that for the insurance on the goods (the slaves had started to fall ill) he was going to get a better price than at the market in Jamaica. In this sense with the act of killing the slaves “he didn’t destroy the goods but accelerated their transformation into money.” That is why Baucom calls the Atlantic “a big factory of loans.”<sup>15</sup>

During that period serfdom was based on, among others, the propination law, i.e. the nobility’s monopoly to produce alcohol and peasants’ obligation to purchase it. In the times when there once was a strong position of Polish grain on the Western market (which led to establishment of the feudal system and the fact that the nobility, who in Medieval times didn’t do farming had to “beat swords into plowshares” and learn farming from the peasants), suddenly changed, another outlet had to be found. Therefore, a brilliant yet simple idea appeared: change grain into vodka and then force peasants to drink it (for instance with use of annual quotas for vodka that peasants had to buy, the judicial apparatus in the form of punishments in the form of an obligatory purchase of vodka, and a custom in the form of the so-called

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15 I. Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*, Durham 2005, p. 60–62.



principle of *litkup*, according to which the parties of the transaction had to drink, otherwise it wasn't binding.

Józef Burszta wrote: "Through the tavern a peasant would receive cash for the work completed and for his own products that were sold by the keeper. In the tavern, and through the tavern, the peasant would dispose of the cash when buying the goods the lord had delivered (herring, salt, handmade goods) and the lord's beverages. The peak of the feudal 'exchange' was the fact that the amount of monetary transactions was sometimes measured with the number of the lord's shots that went down the peasants' throats."<sup>16</sup> This system didn't require large amounts of money in order to work flawlessly, as it resembled, as Witold Kula put it, "a *perpetuum mobile*. Minimal current assets, once invested, could theoretically serve the same purpose with no end."<sup>17</sup> A serf was not only a producer, but also a consumer. And hence it was his role as a consumer that guaranteed the continuity of the feudal system. The economic historian also reminds us that: "an increased global income [of the nobility] from 1601 to 1789 takes place to a greater extent through an increased drainage [of peasants' pockets with the use of the propination law] rather than through an increased profitability of manor's production."<sup>18</sup> That is why the nobility's cruelty towards the serfs manifested also in the fact that they were being forced to drink alcohol. In this sense it was constructed in a different way

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16 J. Burszta, *Wieś i karczma: rola karczmy w życiu wsi pańszczyźnianej*, Warsaw 1950, p. 207.

17 W. Kula, *Teoria ekonomiczna...*, p. 162.

18 W. Kula, *Teoria ekonomiczna...*, p. 159.

than the Atlantic slavery. If we don't analyze such nuances we won't be able to understand the continuity between the feudal system and contemporary Poland. The propination law is one of the reasons for a Polish custom to eat herring with vodka. If the only product that a peasant found in the tavern was vodka, nails (or other hardware) and herring, no wonder he would choose herring.

References to the feudal culture have recently become a universal key used to account for our complexes and pains. For instance a journalist from [the daily] *Gazeta Wyborcza* wrote a story about how our serfdom mentality is revealed during spatial conflicts. Just like a lord used to ride his britzka and could in this way show his contempt for a boor, nowadays this type of psychology is seen in the conflict between pedestrians and drivers, or among different types of drivers.<sup>19</sup> The problem with this way of thinking is that there is no direct connection between the particular parties of this comparison. Moreover, this analogy cannot be empirically confirmed. One can either agree with it or not. That is why it is so important to understand the serfdom specifics. The historic continuity is often much less spectacular than it seems and it usually occurs where it is least expected.

One of the very few examples of works that do not ignore the question of the nature of "the feudal mentality" are by Jacek Olędzki. His book *Murzynowo* helps us to understand for instance that even though the division into "lords" and "serfs" was working on the rhetorical or theoretical level, in

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19 M. Matys, "Waćpan co jest sobą zaćpan," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 14.03.2015, [http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/1,143555,17566612,Wacpan\\_\\_co\\_jest\\_soba\\_zacpan.html](http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/1,143555,17566612,Wacpan__co_jest_soba_zacpan.html) (30.06.2016).

reality this system created a possibility for a promotion.<sup>20</sup> If it hadn't been possible, it could never have existed as there are no societies in history that would be based on total authority and total subordination. The cruelty of the system was reflected in the type of safety anchors inside the system. Hence the institution of *kopczarze*, the lowest rank of supervisors. Most peasants regarded them as collaborators, but many decided to take up this job. Olędzki gives another example in the meaning of wisdom teeth. People used to believe that once a man had wisdom teeth he was mature. However, being "in one's prime" wouldn't last long. Once they reached their thirties people would often be physically wasted. This might explain why numerous men (not women, though it is unknown why) conceal their true age in parish papers (the records of baptism witnesses). Throughout the years they are still recorded as being thirty years old. As a rule, researchers would put it on account of peasants' thickness as they assumed they wouldn't remember their real age or that the local priest wasn't very meticulous in keeping the records. Olędzki takes it seriously and suggests that the serfs might have been afraid that once they turned 30, they would be regarded as being old. Being old at that time meant being doomed to extreme poverty. Not only the lord but their families would also frequently turn their backs on the old. They turned into "beggars."<sup>21</sup> Violence and cruelty were visible not only between the nobility and peasants but also inside the peasant families. Echoes of such an intergenerational conflict and a very

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20 J. Olędzki, *Murzynowo: znaki istnienia i tożsamości kulturalnej mieszkańców wioski nadwiślańskiej XVIII–XX wieku*, Warsaw 2015.

21 J. Olędzki, *Murzynowo*, p. 222–224.

brutal relationship can be found for instance in Reymont's *Peasants* in arguments between the Borynas, despite them being rich and independent peasants. In the case of really poor people, this phenomenon might have been even more dramatic.

### **National Slavery**

This deliberation has led us to the last issue: Poland used to “really” have slavery, even though Skarga's quotation in which he makes a clear reference to slavery in Muslim countries, shows that already in the 16th century its memory had vanished.<sup>22</sup> It was not (as shown for instance by Karol Buczek) a variation of the ancient slavery but, once again, an extraordinary system.<sup>23</sup> Following Karol Modzelewski's footsteps, we might name it as national slavery.<sup>24</sup> Its central institution were the so-called “servant villages,” i.e. places with such names, as Piekary, Rataje or Świniary. Every one of these names refers to a separate profession: bread baking, farming or breeding pigs. In the period of the so-called Duke's law (between the first half of the 10th and the first half of the 13th centuries) in such settlements, the lord would place slave families. There were over 80 specializations, and in contemporary Poland there are still over 600 places bearing such names. Slaves were most often war

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22 According to Jerzy Wyrozumski, it is unknown when “real” slavery ended in Poland. His contractual timeframe is the beginning of the 16th century. Compare. J. Wyrozumski, *Zagadnienie niewolnictwa w dawnej Polsce*, [in:] D. Quirini-Popławska (edited), *Niewolnictwo i niewolnicy w Europie od starożytności po czasy nowożytne*, Kraków 1998, p. 131–138.

23 K. Buczek, “O chłopach w Polsce piastowskiej (część druga),” *Roczniki Historyczne* 41/1975, p. 38.

24 Karol Modzelewski wrote about “national serfdom,” compare K. Modzelewski, *Organizacja gospodarcza państwa piastowskiego X–XIII wieku*, Wrocław 1975, p. 17.

captives. That is why when people were relocated from one place to another, some servant villages would bear names as Pomorzany or Węgrzyny. “[National] slaves were under no jurisdiction of public courts; they were no source of official income for the ruler’s dignitaries and had no law of their own. The Duke had his own exclusive authority over those people and their work. He had unlimited freedom in making decisions regarding the type and amount of their obligations and the whole income was only for himself,” Modzelewski wrote.<sup>25</sup> The scale of this phenomenon is obviously difficult to assess. According to Modzelewski, “if Bolesław II would give hundreds of slaves and their families to his monasteries, he must have had thousands of them himself.”<sup>26</sup> In turn Karol Buczek believed that “the opinion of the high number of serfs [...] needs revising,” even though he contributed to its popularization.<sup>27</sup>

The difficulties in assessment result from the lack of original sources from that period. Modzelewski reconstructed the mechanism of “national slavery” on the basis of materials from later periods as they show the erosion of the system. We are reliant only on presumptions since Andrzej Buko admitted that despite the fact that Polish archaeology had been successful for many years, “so far none of [the serving villages] has been the subject of a separate study.”<sup>28</sup> It illustrates the scale of denial of the fact that slavery was the central axis organizing the Polish society.

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25 Ibidem, p. 132.

26 Ibidem.

27 K. Buczek, “Organizacja służebna w pierwszych wiekach państwa polskiego,” *Studia Historyczne* 3(20)/1977, p. 372.

28 A. Buko, *Archeologia Polski wczesnośredniowiecznej*, Warszawa 2011, p. 333.

For the most part of the post-war period, archaeologists were supposed to confirm the historians' theories generated on the basis of data sources (also later ones). The major paradigm was evolutionism as it was assumed that the Polish state was established through a gradual and peaceful merger of smaller communities, smaller tribes into bigger ones, and then into a state.<sup>29</sup> However, Michał Kara shows that the state of the first Piasts emerged not as a result of a slow evolution, but as a result of a very fast and perfectly organized military and building campaigns.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the phases of expansion of gords in the region of Greater Poland might be perfectly correlated with the particular waves of silver coins (called Dirhams) from the territories of today's Iraq and Iran into the territory of Poland.<sup>31</sup> It turns out that in fact the only witnesses to the beginnings of the Polish state are actually those "silver treasures" and the traces of erected and burnt down gords from those times.

Some Medieval experts, for instance Przemysław Urbańczyk, use these facts to question the fundamental evolutionary theses. They propose completely new theories to describe the origins of the Polish state. These attempts have not been finalized yet. Even though Urbańczyk is trying to understand how Poles could use Arabic silver and he states that "it is almost certain that Mieszko I participated in sending Slavic slaves to the south,"<sup>32</sup> he is yet

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29 Przegląd teorii ewolucyjnych można znaleźć w: M. Kara, *Najstarsze państwo Piastów – rezultat przełomu czy kontynuacji? Studium archeologiczne*, Poznań 2009, p. 11–51.

30 M. Kara, *Najstarsze państwo...*, p. 317–321.

31 D. Adamczyk, "Trzecia fala napływu srebra arabskiego a powstanie 'państwa' piastowskiego," *Wiadomości Numizmatyczne* 1-2(58)/2014, p. 33–53.

32 P. Urbańczyk, *Mieszko Pierwszy Tajemniczy*, Toruń 2012, p. 123.

not interested in the question whether the export of slaves from Greater Poland to the Islamic world had any impact on the organization of the first state of the Piasts. Similarly, Michał Kara maintains that the emergence of the Piast state occurred as a result of a peaceful agreement and a “social contract,” in spite of the fact that his books show the scale of violence at that time.<sup>33</sup> None of them wishes to return to the debate between Modzelewski and Buczek, the debate that basically faded away in the 1970s. Modzelewski in turn, despite having written most extensively on Polish slavery, never wondered about the source of demand for slave bodies. The researcher claims that the first Polish state emerged on its own, isolated from the rest of the world. Despite showing the uniqueness of Polish slavery, he maintains that the main geopolitical point of reference for the Piasts was the Latin West.<sup>34</sup>

Dariusz Adamczyk, one of the first people who made the connection between the influx of silver and geopolitical changes in the core of the Islamic world and the emergence of the Piast state, similarly to Kara or Urbański, avoids deliberations on the impact of slavery and what was happening in the territory controlled by Mieszko I and his relatives, also when the influx of silver from the Islamic world ended.<sup>35</sup>

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33 M. Kara, *Najstarsze państwo...*, p. 285–286.

34 K. Modzelewski, *Barbarzyńska Europa*, Warszawa 2004, p. 7–12, 69–70, 79, 184–185, 420–425, 451.

35 See D. Adamczyk, “Czy bez Mahometa nie byłoby Mieszka i Bolesława I? Arabski system handlowy a ekonomia polityczna społeczeństw Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w X wieku,” *Historia Slavorum Occidentis* 1/2015, p. 19–33.

The reason as to why the discussions on the Piasts' participation in the international slave trade and theories related to how the institution of slavery impacted the internal organization of the Polish state and society have never met is trivial: it is the movement called Westernizers<sup>36</sup> who, as Jack Goody showed, are convinced that the center of the world has always been in the West. It is this movement, still extremely powerful in Poland, which has stolen our history.<sup>37</sup> We are still certain that, as Jan Sowa puts it, our history has *never-happened* and we live in a society that is unable to “independently fill its name with content” and hence we “keep using the patterns borrowed from the outside, from the perfect Others, in the West.”<sup>38</sup> If we keep thinking this way we will never escape the dialectics of pride and the embarrassment of peripheries as well as limited analyses based on easy analogies that could be misleading. Once we understand that in Poland, similar to any other country, there was never “real” slavery, a “real” feudal system or today there is no and won't be “real” capitalism, but instead there were, are and will be special systems, we will be able to begin the reconciliation process with their cruel stigma. But first we need to stop defining the word “real” as “the same as in the West.” Only then will we be able to cease being peoples without history.

**translated by Justyna Chada**

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36 See. M. Featherstone, “Occidentalism: Jack Goody and Comparative History,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 7-8(26)/2009, p. 1–15. In my book entitled *Kapitalizm. Historia krótkiego trwania* (Warsaw 2016) I make an attempt to combine these two discussions.

37 See J. Goody, *Kradzież historii*, Warsaw 2009.

38 J. Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla: peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą*, Kraków 2011, p. 18.







