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WAS POLAND AFFECTED BY THE LATE-MEDIEVAL CRISIS OF FEUDALISM?

The question posed in the title could be answered in short: no. However, it will remain open unless we inspect the mechanism of the Polish late-medieval economic system and the social effects of its functioning, unless we grasp the indices of economic growth in various spheres of life, unless we compare Polish developmental trends with those of that part of Europe where the crisis was manifest and whose observation gave rise to the question posed above.

One must state at the very outset that the problem is controversial even with respect to West-European countries, whose observation gave rise to the view about the crisis of feudalism. For the sake of clarity, one should first answer the question as to what symptoms of collective life were included in the idea of crisis and in what sense can the crisis there be understood. The demographic fall used to be considered the most spectacular symptom of the economic recession and the crisis of the West-European feudal system. This fall was at its lowest in the middle of the 14th c. and was a direct consequence of the “Black Death” of 1348. The whole 15th c. could not compensate for this fall. A less spectacular, but important component of crisis was the widening of price scissors, i.e. a rise of prices for manufactured goods and a fall of prices for food products. This signified a real decrease in the profits of the seigniorial stratum, considering that the so-called expansion of colonization, i.e. the possibility of expanding the area under cultivation came to an end in Western Europe already in the 13th c. After the technical achievements of the 13th c., further intensification of agriculture had also proved for many years practically impossible. One can perceive a crisis in socio-political structures, whose internal conflicts led to long-lasting destructive wars (the Hundred Years War, the War of the Roses),

and in fact did not find a solution. The Battle of Crécy brought to light the crisis in the medieval art of war. The downfall of the highest authorities of the then world, i.e. the Empire and Papacy, and at any rate the end of their universal aspirations and potentialities, gives much food for thought.

The sources of the crisis of feudalism in Western Europe have been sought in many areas¹; in the said “Black Death” and the demographic catastrophe, in long-lasting destructive wars, in the stagnation of urban production², in the economic reorientation then under way³, in the climatic cycle, which precisely in the 14th c. manifested itself in disadvantageous changes, finally in the unfavourable economic situation. In view of Guy Bois’ studies of the source material from Eastern Normandy, observed over a long span of time, one rather tends to perceive in the late Middle Ages a structural crisis of the feudal system⁴. It has to be stated, however, that this crisis manifested itself on the one hand in the fall in profits of the seigniorial stratum, i.e. it signified a recession of its economic power, but on the other hand it meant the relatively prosperous development of the so-called middle strata, both in towns and in the countryside. Historians have drawn attention to the dynamic growth of production of middle-quality cloth, the so-called arras and kersey⁵. The simplest explanation for it can be the growth in demand for cloth among the craftsmen, wealthier peasants, better-skilled hired workers etc. This was a reflection — it seems — of the other side of the crisis of feudalism, namely the growth of the middle strata. This is an important element of the historical process comprehensively termed as crisis. Therefore we must be very cautious in our approach.

On the other hand it must be stated that even this crisis of feudal structures arouses certain doubts from West-European researchers. Roger Sablonier, who traced the situation of the nobility in Eastern Switzerland, in the region of Zürich and the Lake of Constance, although he states a certain economic recession in the estates of this social group in the years 1330–1470, yet he does not understand it as a drastic phenomenon and thinks that it can be explained in a large measure by the shift of the centre of political

¹Of importance in this respect is F. Graus’ recapitulation, *Das Spätmittelalter als Krisenzeit. Ein Literaturbericht als Zwischenbilanz*, Mediaevalia Bohemica 1, 1969, Supplementum 1.

²R. H. Hilton, *L’Angleterre économique et sociale des XIV^e et XV^e siècles*, “Annales ESC” 13, 1958, pp. 541–563; the same author’s, *Y eut-il une crise générale de la féodalité?*, “Annales ESC” 6, 1951, pp. 23–30 (as well as a reprint, Paris 1977).

³E. Pitz, *Die Wirtschaftskrise des Spätmittelalters*, “Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte” 52, 1965, pp. 347–367.

⁴G. Bois, *Crise du féodalisme*, Paris 1976.

⁵M. Małowist, *Studia z dziejów rzemiosła w okresie kryzysu feudalizmu w zachodniej Europie w XIV i XV wieku (Studies in the History of Crafts During the Crisis of Feudalism in Western Europe in the 14th and 15th c.)*, Warszawa 1954, p. 203 and foll.

life, connected with the Habsburgs, from Switzerland to Austria⁶. This observation also tells us to be cautious in our assessment of the crisis phenomena in Western Europe. The question still remains open as to whether the big demographic fall of the 14th c. in the West can be associated with the crisis of feudalism, whether it was not a side-effect, loosely connected to the crisis of feudal structures, especially where it must be treated as a consequence of the plague⁷. Where it was the effect of the Hundred Years War, it was connected more closely with the whole feudal system.

One reservation should be made in this context, which seems important to Central Europe. Namely, in comparison to Western Europe, both in respect of economic development and the evolution of social relations, Central Europe lagged behind. Suffice it to mention the later adoption of those technical achievements which in Western Europe were wide-spread already in the 13th c. In Central Europe the process of urbanization as well as the so-called great monetary reform etc. came later. One need not mention other elements of the historical process which manifest this delay. Is it then methodically justifiable to seek a crisis of feudal structures in Central Europe in the same period as in the West? Should not one rather assume that such a crisis could occur here much later? Naturally, these are questions to which I will seek answers.

According to the opinion which is generally accepted in Polish historiography, 14th c. Poland was at the stage of prosperous development in many spheres of life. This current opinion will not, however, satisfy us, and we shall seek some objective indices in so far as they can be offered by our sources.

I will go on the assumption that the conditions in which the political unity of Poland was being recovered were unfavourable. The shift of the reborn Kingdom from West to East, the loss of access to the sea, had very serious consequences. Poland lost highly-urbanized and well-populated Silesia, and extended its dominion over Halicz-Włodzimierz Ruthenia, which was still waiting for urban investments on a large scale. Despite the appearances of peaceful development, Casimir the Great's Poland was involved in a long-lasting conflict with Lithuania, which devoured considerable financial means and distracted from economic activity not merely individuals, but a large percentage of the population. If the internal normalization of Casimir's era counterbalanced the anxieties and tensions of the eastern borderland, under Angevin rule this element of the internal structure

⁶R. Sablonier, *Zur wirtschaftlichen Situation des Adels im Spätmittelalter*, in: *Adelige Sachkultur des Spätmittelalters*, Wien 1982, pp. 9-34.

⁷Cf. E. Keyser, *Neue deutsche Forschungen über die Geschichte der Pest*, "Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte" 42, 1957, pp. 243-253.

of the state was considerably upset. It is true that the Union of Poland with Lithuania signified a quenching of armed conflict in the East, however it naturally entailed the further movement of the investment potential eastwards.

What was the dynamic of Poland's internal development in such political conditions? One should start with the demographic factor. And here, at the very outset, we encounter a difficulty. We have 14th c. material at our disposal, which permits us to estimate the population of Poland, however, we cannot compare these data with the 13th c. In face of far-reaching territorial changes, global estimates for the Polish state within its borders of the 13th and the 14th c. would not explain anything. What remains for us to do, is only to grasp the dynamic trend of Poland's population over a long span of time and to draw conclusions from its intensity. Such research was carried out in his time by Stanisław Hoszowski, and — as it seems to me — his results cannot arouse any doubts. Both the 14th and the 15th c. clearly show an upward tendency⁸. Nor was Poland affected — on the same scale as the West — by plagues, and the wars both of the 14th and the 15th c. were waged outside the frontiers of Poland. Thus they did not entail any losses among the civil population or their possessions.

If we accept after Wilhelm Abel that the late-medieval crisis of feudalism was above all an agrarian crisis⁹, and after Guy Bois that it was in a large measure the result of achieving the limit of the so-called colonization expansion in Western Europe in the 13th c.¹⁰, then we should ask what possibilities of expanding the acreage, i.e. of putting new land under cultivation, were there in Poland? Considering that at the end of the 13th c. the density of population in France amounted already to 35 persons per km², and in Poland in the 14th c., on average, barely to 9 persons per km², we must conclude that, given the contemporary standard of agriculture, there were great land reserves in our state¹¹. They were distributed unevenly, being bigger in the East than in the West, and the biggest in Ruthenia, but they constituted a way open for increasing profits for the group whose existence was based on feudal rent. This was rather a problem of gaining

⁸S. Hoszowski, *Dynamika rozwoju zaludnienia Polski w epoce feudalnej, X–XVIII w.* (*The Developmental Dynamic of Poland's Population in the Feudal Era, the 10th–18th c.*), in: "Roczniki Dziejów Społecznych i Gospodarczych" 13, 1951, pp. 137–198; cf. also W. Kula, *Stan i potrzeby badań nad demografią historyczną dawnej Polski — do początków XIX wieku* (*The State and Need for Research on the Historical Demography of Old Poland — till the Beginning of the 19th c.*), *ibid.*, pp. 23–136.

⁹W. Abel, *Strukturen und Krisen der spätmittelalterlichen Wirtschaft*, Stuttgart — New York 1980.

¹⁰G. Bois, *Crise*, pp. 239–241.

¹¹T. Ładogórski, *Studia nad zaludnieniem Polski XIV wieku* (*Studies of the Population of Poland in the 14th c.*), Wrocław 1958, p. 228.

settlers, who were attracted to it by many years of exemption from taxes, rents and service. There can be no doubt that rural settlements founded on the principle of rent law still in the 14th and 15th c. made great progress in our country not only as regards the reorganization of former villages but also foundation of new ones. This is testified by numerous late-medieval colonization privileges. Substantial information in this respect concerning the first half of the 14th c. can be found in the fragmentary remains of the book of endowments of the Płock bishopric¹². Still in the 14th c. German colonists came to Little Poland and Ruthenia, making up for the shortage of Polish settlers. In the 15th c. this influx for the most part stopped. At that time the settlers who had settled long before started to leave the villages in search of better conditions, or perhaps of longer exemption from duties. This process was very detrimental to feudal property. The endowments book of the Poznań diocese from 1422 records a number of settlers who had left the villages in Great Poland¹³. This could be regarded as a symptom of an agrarian crisis; its scale, however, must have been small, since there is no reflection of it in the sources from Little Poland. It is possible, however, that the so-called “land arrangement”, a legal regulation of Łęczyca and Mazovia provinces¹⁴, in fact advantageous to the rural population, was intended to thwart this escape of settlers. This shows that the possibilities of increasing profit by extra-economic compulsion were limited for the nobility, and it was especially significant of the 14th and 15th c. The custom to provide a settler with advance investments was intended both to win him over and to link him as closely as possible with the nobility *dominium*¹⁵. Casimir the Great’s Statutes, requiring that a settler on the principle of German law, who had the right to leave the village, should leave an equally wealthy successor to his land, also intended to stabilize settlements. Some drastic moves came only towards the end of the Middle Ages and found their expression in the acts of King John Albert. They concern the limitation of a possibility to leave the village by the young people who sought non-agricultural jobs, or wanted to join harvesting work in Silesia or Prussia¹⁶.

¹²*Monumenta Poloniae Historica*, vol. III, Lwów 1878, pp. 122–124 (the so-called *Spominki Płockie*).

¹³Text in the notes to: *Liber beneficiorum dioecesis Posnaniensis anni 1510*, ed. J. Nowacki, Poznań 1950, pp. 26–56.

¹⁴*Ius Polonicum*, ed. J. W. Bandycki, Warszawa 1831, pp. 194–200; *Iura Masoviae terrestria*, ed. J. Sawicki, vol. I–II, Warszawa 1972–1973 (particular statutes of Mazovian princes).

¹⁵*Statut wielkopolski (The Great-Polish Statute)*, art. 34 (*Statuty Kazimierza Wielkiego — Casimir the Great’s Statutes*, part II, ed. L. Łysiak, Warszawa 1982, p. 46 and foll.).

¹⁶*Ius Polonicum*, pp. 343 and 348 and foll.

If the process of urbanization was an element of economic growth in 12th–13th c. Western Europe, then it must have had a similar character in Poland, although here it was in a large measure organized by the rulers. Only in Silesia its culmination came in the 13th c., while within the frontiers of the reborn Kingdom it took a different course. In Great Poland and Little Poland merely 40% of towns came into being in the 13th c. (in Silesia about 70%), and the culmination of the wave of urbanization came in these two provinces in the 14th c., while in Mazovia and Ruthenia not till the 15th c. It is very significant that no town commune came into being in Little Poland east of the line of Dunajec and Vistula rivers in the 13th c.¹⁷ The whole process in question did not start here till the 14th c.

The symptoms of real economic growth during the process of Poland's urbanization are obscured to a large extent by the circumstance that — as it has been mentioned — this process was in a large measure organized by the rulers, the Church and great secular land owners. There can be no doubt that in many cases the plans outgrew the possibilities and expressed the wishes which could not be fulfilled in reality. Hence the underdevelopment of many towns of Great Poland, eastern Little Poland, Kujawy, Łęczyca and Sieradz provinces, and especially Mazovia and Ruthenia. These towns had a population of several hundred inhabitants each, and were largely of an agricultural character. Thus they can be treated at the same time as an element in the development of agricultural settlements, since the foundation of many towns was connected with putting a large area, sometimes up to 100 *łans*, under cultivation. The design — as Anna Berdecka has shown — was to create an agricultural hinterland for the organized town commune. In fact, this was frequently the most successful component of a settlement enterprise¹⁸. Thus the Polish process of urbanization should be treated in part as an element of development of agricultural settlements, whose expansive power, also in the late Middle Ages, cannot be brought into question.

Another question which must come to mind will concern the development of those urban settlements which became real centres of urban life, i.e. of crafts and commerce. Let me take the example of Cracow. Due to a fortunate coincidence we are in possession of yearly registers of the guilds' seniors, beginning with the end of the 14th, throughout the 15th c. On the basis of this material we can trace not only the emergence of new guilds but

¹⁷J. Wyrozumski, *Rozwój sieci miejskiej w Małopolsce w średniowieczu i u progu czasów nowożytnych* (*The Development of an Urban Network in Little Poland in the Middle Ages and on the Verge of the Modern Era*), "Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej" 28, 1980, pp. 363–372.

¹⁸A. Berdecka, *Lokacja i zagospodarowanie miast królewskich w Małopolsce za Kazimierza Wielkiego, 1333–1370* (*The Foundation and Economic Organization of Royal Cities in Little Poland During the Reign of Casimir the Great, 1333–1370*), Wrocław 1982, chapt. II.

also the coming into prominence of certain specialities within the existing guilds, as well as the rise and fall in the number of craftsmen in particular branches, which found its reflection in the number of seniors¹⁹. As early as the 14th c. handicraft production must have developed here dynamically, since by the decree of Casimir the Great of 1368, half of the city's councillors were to be merchants and half craftsmen²⁰. At the turn of the 14th c. there were 18 craftsmen's guilds in Cracow. In the first half of the 15th c. the crafts of Cracow developed a special dynamic of their own, particularly in the first decades of that century. By 1450 the number of (productive) guilds grew from 18 to 29, a number of new specialities having been added. An equally rapid development in crafts occurred in Lublin, as Barbara Nowak's studies show, since in the 15th c. one can count as many as 39 craftsmen's specialities²¹. The same trend is shown by the results of studies by Kazimierz Arłamowski (for Przemyśl) and Łucja Charewiczowa (for Lwów)²². I do not mention Gdańsk and Wrocław, well-studied in this respect, which were also marked by the dynamic development of handicrafts, since they remained outside Polish borders. Needless to say, the political affiliation seems in this respect of no consequence, as the phenomena in question cannot be confined to the area of one state.

What we can describe of Polish commerce in the late Middle Ages also points to a considerable animation, both along the axis East–West and North–South, and in the sphere of transit and exchange of native products. It is impossible for me to go into details here, however, it must be said that Cracow — without fear of slackening commercial circulation — could successfully struggle for the full and unconditional right to storage from both the above-mentioned axes, that merchants from the territory of the monastic state, especially those from Toruń, persistently endeavoured throughout two centuries to establish direct commercial contacts with Hungary and Ruthenia, that not only Wrocław (Breslau) but also Nuremberg endeavoured to get access to Ruthenia, and that since the last years of Casimir the Great's reign Cracow had been a member of the Hanseatic League²³. For two centuries at least Poland was an area of active transit. Significant changes

¹⁹*Cracovia artificum 1300–1500*, ed. J. Ptaśnik, Kraków 1917.

²⁰*Starodawne prawa polskiego pomniki (The Old Monuments of Polish Law)*, vol. I, ed. A. Z. Helcel, Warszawa 1856, p. 226.

²¹J. Wyrozumski, *Kraców do schyłku wieków średnich (Cracow till the End of the Middle Ages)*, in: *Dzieje Krakowa*, vol. I, Kraków 1992, pp. 331–371; B. Nowak, *Rzemiosło Lublina do połowy XVI wieku (Lublin Crafts till the Middle of the 16th c.)*, Lublin 1991, pp. 20–25.

²²K. Arłamowski, *Rzemiosło przemyskie od XIV wieku do roku 1949 (Crafts in Przemyśl from the 14th c. up till the Year 1949)*, Przemyśl 1981; Ł. Charewiczowa, *Lwowskie organizacje zawodowe za czasów Polski przedrozbiorowej (Trade Organizations in Lwów Before the Partitions of Poland)*, Lwów 1929.

occurred towards the end of the 15th c., however they were reduced to shifting the East–West commercial axis to the Warsaw–Poznań line, and in the North–South commerce to structural changes, i.e. to taking over the Hungarian copper by big merchants' companies.

Nor can there be any doubt that native production played an important role in the commerce of late–medieval Poland, which can be treated as an important index of development. To become specific, we know about Cracow knives and hats, which were sold in Halicz Ruthenia and Moldavia²⁴. We also know about cloth, not only from Cracow but also from smaller towns such as Lelów or Sulejów, which went the same way²⁵. Polish mining products, especially lead and salt²⁶, became export articles of great significance. Polish lead was used in the mining area south of the Carpathians and Sudetes, as a good catalyst in the process of acquiring silver. The salt from Little Poland met with much demand in Silesia and Bohemia.

Significant indices of development can be found precisely in mining. Casimir the Great introduced *numerus clausus* for excavating stands in the salt–mines both of Bochnia and Wieliczka. There were to be 60 of them in each, and the King justified it by his concern for future generations, lest they should be short of salt²⁷. Hence we can infer that there was an upward tendency in salt mining and for this reason maximum figures were accepted for it. Ore mining, on the other hand, precisely at the turn of the 14th c. — as it has been shown by Danuta Mołenda — crossed a significant technological threshold, namely it reached below the level of subsoil water²⁸. This would have been impossible if there was an economic recession, let alone stagnation. Apart from mining, an important technological threshold — as it has been shown by Andrzej Wyrobisz — was crossed at the beginning of the 14th c. in the production of glass²⁹.

²³S. Kutrzeba, *Handel Krakowa w wiekach średnich na tle stosunków handlowych Polski (Medieval Commerce in Cracow Against the Background of Commercial Relations in Poland)*, Kraków 1902.

²⁴Ł. Charewiczowa, *Handel średniowiecznego Lwowa (Commerce in Medieval Lwów)*, Lwów 1925, chapt. VI.

²⁵J. Wyrozumski, *Tkactwo małopolskie w późnym średniowieczu (Late–Medieval Weaving in Little Poland)*, Warszawa 1972, chapt. VI.

²⁶D. Mołenda, *Górnictwo kruszcowe na terenie złóż śląsko–krakowskich do połowy XVI wieku (Ore–Mining in the Silesian–Cracovian Lodes until the Middle of the 16th c.)*, Wrocław 1963, pp.81–90; J. Wyrozumski, *Państwowa gospodarka solna do schyłku XIV wieku (The State Salt Economy until the End of the 14th c.)*, Kraków 1968, chapt. VI.

²⁷*Starodawne prawa polskiego pomniki*, vol. I, p. 223 and foll.

²⁸D. Mołenda, *Górnictwo*, p. 9.

²⁹A. Wyrobisz, *Szkło w Polsce od XIV do XVII w. (Glass in Poland from the 14th until the 17th c.)*, Wrocław 1968, p. 11.

We should now pass on to the question of prices, which were subject to an economic crisis in Western Europe. This manifested itself in the widening of price scissors, a fall in the prices of food products and a rise in those of manufactured goods. This affected strongly the developmental possibilities of agriculture, but was advantageous to the population who were not employed in it. With respect to Poland we have at our disposal Julian Pełc's work, concerning the prices in Cracow, beginning with the 14th c. Taking Cracow as an example we shall try to trace this phenomenon, subjecting to analysis several food and manufactured articles. Against this background, it would also be worthwhile analysing the movement of labour prices. Thus, as regards wheat and rye in the years 1389–1498 we do not perceive a rise of prices, only price variations typical of this article. The same concerns the prices of iron. As for cloth, I can state on the basis of my own research that its prices remained almost at the same level throughout the 15th c. Considerable stabilization of prices is also visible as regards beer. The wages of this period can be sized up in respect of municipal clerks and functionaries. There is also considerable stability in them³⁰.

What remains, is the matter of currency. It is impossible to omit it, considering that some historians regarded precisely the monetary crisis as *primum movens* of the crisis of feudalism in Western Europe. Bad currency or stagnation in this sphere introduced by the state was regarded as the basic destructive factor³¹. If this had been true, Poland would have had to be a scene of very strong upheavals. It is well-known that the *grosz* system introduced by Casimir the Great, although it was connected to the lofty slogan *unus rex — una moneta*, carried considerable danger. The Polish *groszes* released into circulation were poor coins, standing at any rate no comparison with the Bohemian *groszes*, but they had to be used in all transactions under the most severe penalty³². It seems that it was due precisely to strong contemporary economics that these extra-economic pressures could be overcome, since the 15th c. presents itself as a period of considerable stabilization of currency, manifest in the steady relation of *groszes* to florins.

It was František Graus who stated that the concept of late medieval crisis cannot be limited to economic relations, but should be extended into various spheres of life at that time³³. I presented this issue thus at the

³⁰J. Pełc, *Ceny w Krakowie w latach 1369–1600 (Prices in Cracow from 1369 to 1600)*, p. 8 and foll., 28, 134 and foll.; J. Wyrozumski, *Tkactwo*, chapt. VI.

³¹Cf. F. Graus, *Das Spätmittelalter*, pp. 45–55.

³²*Starodawne prawa polskiego pomniki*, vol. I, p. 226.

³³F. Graus, *Das Spätmittelalter*, p. 6.

beginning of the present article. I should like to answer here the question as to how far a crisis can be perceived in the late–medieval social structures of Poland, in her state organization, in military service, as well as in the sphere of culture and ideology.

The Polish late Middle Ages are marked by a ripening of estate structures. The clergy was the first to form itself as an estate, as early as the 13th c.; the burghers naturally assumed the form of a separate estate with the rise and development of town communes, which by their very nature accorded their members estate characteristics. Rural population was becoming a separate estate as if by way of elimination, when other estates were enclosing themselves. Slaves, known in the Polish early medieval period, were not institutionally acknowledged as a separate social category either in the 14th or in the 15th c.³⁴ However, we can speak about the formation of a separate *sculteti* estate in the 14th c., one marked by considerable economic power, numerical strength and a universal duty towards the state in the form of military service³⁵. The crucial element was the noble estate, which in Western Europe paid the costs of the said crisis. What did this estate look like in Poland?

In the 14th c. this social stratum in fact did not constitute yet a separate estate. Casimir the Great's Statutes clearly distinguish in it three groups which were entitled to considerably differentiated fines for homicide and other crimes. The group entitled to the highest fine for homicide, in Great Poland 60 *grzywnas*, consisted of knights who held some offices, and they were originally called *szlachta* (the nobility). Another group consisted of common knights, whose fine for homicide was 30 *grzywnas*, and finally there was a third group, who were paid 15 *grzywnas*, the so-called *milites ficticii*, knights derived from peasants, *sculteti* etc.³⁶ As early as the last decades of the 14th c. these differences started to be obliterated. Since the beginning of the 15th c. trials mushroomed because of the so-called denial of the nobility. This was an evident symptom that this social stratum started to enclose itself as a separate estate.

It was largely differentiated in respect of property. The latter determined different possibilities of social advancement and political role. However, on the whole, this was a privileged stratum, essentially enjoying the

³⁴J. Wyrozumski, *Zagadnienie niewoli w późnym średniowieczu polskim (The Problem of Slavery in Late–Medieval Poland)*, in: *Spółczesność Polski średniowiecznej*, Warszawa 1982, pp. 125–159.

³⁵L. Łysiak, *Własność soltysia (wójtowska) w Małopolsce do końca XVI wieku (The Property of the «Sculteti» in Little Poland until the End of the 16th c.)*, Kraków 1964, chapt. I.

³⁶*Statut małopolski (The Little–Polish Statute)*, art. 50 in: *Statuty Kazimierza Wielkiego*, part I, ed. O. Balzer, Poznań 1947, p. 138.

same rights. In the 15th c. it created legal barriers which guarded its representatives against the possibility of being imprisoned by state authorities without court verdict, it acquired a warrant of inviolability of their possessions without such a verdict and an influence on the course of state matters first through land meetings and later through the institution of general meeting i.e. the *seym*. This stratum created land self-government, which held considerable branches of public power in voivodeships and lands. Still in the 14th c. it might have seemed that towns would also play an important role in the state. During the interregnum following the death of Louis d'Anjou the rule over particular provinces was in the hands of eight-person commissions, each including two burghers with the right of veto³⁷. This meant that against the will of the towns the nobility could not pass any bill of importance. In the institutions created in the 15th c. which represented society in the ruling apparatus, no more room was left for the representatives of towns. The nobility also managed largely to absorb into its ranks the *sculteti* estate created in the 14th c. This on the one hand came about on the basis of an act which allowed for purchase by the nobility of the property of "recalcitrant and useless" *sculteti*³⁸, and on the other hand through a gradual transference of their property to landed estates³⁹.

In the 15th c., the nobility, almost parallel with its struggle for a share in state power, took the offensive in the economic battle. It took over profitable posts and leaseholds, it successfully entered many typically urban fields, i.e. commerce, almost taking control of some of its branches. At the same time it enjoyed some freedom from customs duties, in face of which the competition of towns stood no chance of success. One can trace the advancement of this whole social stratum by following the biographies of its particular representatives. Purchases of landed estates, loans on security, exchanges, leases, combined even with a modest office, sometimes became a basis for big fortunes. Around the wealthy families there was always room for their clients coming from poorer nobility; in this way a coherent, solid, and numerically strong community of noblemen was formed, which left its clear imprint on the historical process of Poland. One cannot speak of a crisis in this social stratum in the Polish late-medieval period.

We have to ask now, whether the crisis affected other strata, clearly dominated by the nobility. One should first analyse the most numerous stratum, i.e. the rural population. There are no traces of its critical situation

³⁷*Codex epistolaris saeculi decimi quinti*, vol. I., ed. A. Sokołowski, J. Szujski, Kraków 1876, № 2.

³⁸*Statut warcki z 1423 r. (The Warka Statute of 1423)*, art. 25 (*Ius Polonicum*, p. 215 and foll.).

³⁹L. Łysia k, *Własność*, p. 84.

either in the 14th or the 15th c. As early as Casimir the Great's times, some legal barriers were formed which long secured the peasant's fate, although in fact they guarded the interests of landed property. Peasants settled on both the principle of German law and of Polish law could leave their lords, providing they fulfilled definite conditions, that is did so in suitable time, after the harvest was reaped, lease dues paid and their farmsteads were left in proper order. Obviously, the years free from dues constituted an obstacle. A peasant settled on the principle of German law was obliged to pay rent for his lord, and one who was settled according to Polish law had to work additionally as many years as were free from dues⁴⁰. The German law required him to leave an equally wealthy successor, Polish law required a payment for the so-called *wstanne* (abandonment of the farm) or *gościnnie* (installation of a new lease-holder), which was, however, not a considerable sum⁴¹. Casimir the Great's Statutes introduced a limitation to the departures to two peasants per year, so that whole villages would not be depopulated. Two peasants could leave without the lord's permission⁴², but with his permission more could depart at the same time. There was also a barrier that guarded rural population against the lord's wilfulness. If a lord violated a peasant's daughter or wife, if he for any reason was excommunicated and consequently the village lost the right to Christian burial, or if because of the lord's crime the peasant property was to cover the damages — then the lord could be left by all his peasants⁴³.

At the same time, towards the end of the Middle Ages the Polish village created a district self-government; representatives of a village took part in *sculteti's* courts as assessors, thus restricting considerably their patrimonial character. The rural population was sometimes wealthy; we know of the cases where the nobles borrowed money from their own subjects⁴⁴. Although in 1421 in Mazovia a decree was passed for a minimum labour due of one day a week per *łan*, yet in the Polish Crown such a legal regulation was passed only a hundred years later. One should also emphasize that the late-medieval Polish countryside as a rule did not know any sharp class conflicts, or riots quenched with blood, which could be observed, e.g. in contemporary Germany.

⁴⁰*Statut wielkopolski*, art. 34 (see note 15).

⁴¹*Zwód prawa ziemi łęczyckiej (The Legal Statute of the Łęczyca Province)*, art. 34–36 (*Ius Polonicum*, pp. 194–200), *Statutes of Mazovian princes (Iura Masoviae terrestria*, vol. I, N° 37, 65).

⁴²*Statut małopolski*, art. 73 (*Statuty*, part I, p. 438 and foll.).

⁴³*Statut wielkopolski*, art. 34, *małopolski*, art. 73 — see notes 15, 42. Cf. also *Zwód prawa ziemi łęczyckiej*, art. 67 (*Ius Polonicum*, p. 200).

⁴⁴K. Tymieniecki, *Procesy twórcze formowania się społeczeństwa polskiego w wiekach średnich (Formative Processes of Polish Society in the Middle Ages)*, Warszawa 1921, pp. 338–340.

There was, however, a marked conflict between the nobility and the towns, the most spectacular symptom of which was the killing of Andrzej Tęczyński by the Cracow inhabitants. The nobility ever more violently opposed the high prices for craftsmen's services and products, it attacked the guilds and demanded their abolition, and even obtained some legal norms in this respect⁴⁵. At the same time it started to occupy, especially commercial, posts, taking advantage of freedom from customs duties for *proprii laboris* products. The towns were still strong enough to oppose the economic pressure of the nobility, but deprived of influence on the course of public affairs, they were increasingly dominated by the nobles. There were some elements of crises here, to be sure, but they were the reverse of the West-European crisis of feudalism.

In the sphere of ideology and culture Poland in the late-medieval period not only did not exhibit any crisis, but on the contrary — was marked by a high dynamic. The conflict between the nobility and the Church was basically reduced to the matter of tithes, Hussitism aroused among the Polish nobility very superficial interest, while the disputes over conciliarism did not go beyond the ecclesiastical and academic circles. The struggle for the sovereignty of state power over the Church was in fact the matter of royal politics. On the other hand the fine development of the Cracow Academy in the 15th c., great interest in science, literature, historiography, going beyond university circles and embracing those of noblemen, burghers and even plebeians — was rather a symptom of dynamic than stagnation, let alone a crisis in late-medieval Poland.

(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)

⁴⁵*Statut warcki z 1423 r.*, art. 32 (*Ius Polonicum*, p. 220).