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Slavery, Conversion, and Ethnicity in Late Medieval Galicia

In my presentation I intend to highlight interconnected histories of slavery, religion, and ethnicity in fifteenth-century Galicia. Galicia, although hardly visible at the present historiographical map of the international research and scholarly debates on slavery and dependency, offers an interesting case of “the society with slaves” in both in East European and Eurasian perspectives. During the later Middle Ages, Galicia emerged as one of the peripheries of Latin Europe following the collapse of the Ruthenian Halych-Volynian polity in the mid-14th century. The final conquest and the incorporation of Galicia in the Kingdom of Poland during the late 14th and early 15th centuries created the new province and led to the profound changes in its political, social, and ethnic-religious structures and relations. As a result, the region was transformed into a new cultural contact zone, situated at the east-southern borders of the kingdom.

Slavery was an old-age institution in Galicia, with the earliest evidence dated from the 12th-13th centuries, when the region was a part of the Rus’ polities, ruled by the Rurikid dynasty. The relations of slavery persisted in the region after its incorporation into the Kingdom of Poland. Slaving Christians by Christians was a remarkable feature of the local relations of dependency. Cases, in which slaves and masters formally shared the same religious and ethnic identity, seemed to have been regular for the local relationships of debt, household service, and patriarchy. The presentation seeks to demonstrate how such slaving practices can be understood in the local contexts of religion and ethnicity.

In late medieval Kingdom of Poland, both ecclesiastical and secular laws promoted the redemption and liberation of the enslaved Christians, mainly Roman Catholics. At the same time, those legal provisions were grounded on the principles of ethnic-religious segregation and discrimination, reflecting the political and cultural hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church. Within those contexts, the Orthodox Ruthenians and Monophysite Armenians were usually viewed as “schismatics”, even represented in some cases as non-Christians, and, therefore, excluded from the privilege of liberation. Consequently, conversion to Roman Catholicism became a legitimate and viable path to emancipation. Such conversions prove the ability of individuals seeking freedom, to exploit for their benefit the resources of dominant political and religious institutions and discourses. It is important to emphasize that religious conversions in Poland-Lithuania during the 15th-16th centuries were accompanied by rebaptism, as well as changes of name, becoming important cultural transitions between religious and ethnic groups.