Main Market Square as a Stage in the Town Theatre.
An Example of Medieval Kraków

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In the following paper the history of the Kraków’s Main Market Square as a stage in the theatre of the town is to be presented. Not only will the author discuss changes of the scenography (the transformation of the structure of the buildings) in the 13th – 15th centuries, but he will also focus on the characteristics of the spectacles played on that scene, in which the entire community of the town participated: meetings of the town councillors with the urban community, public executions, greetings and last tributes to the kings – homages and funeral ceremonies, Corpus Christi processions, the preaching activity of John of Capestrano in the years 1453 – 1454 and miraculous events connected with his visit.

Key words: Medieval Kraków. Main market square. Town council. Kraków’s burgesses.

“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts.”¹ These widely known words are uttered in the last scene of the second act of the comedy by William Shakespeare As you like it, written at the close of the 16th century, though published not until in the twenties of the next century. A concept expressed does not constitute an acquisition of the Elizabethan age, for Shakespeare clearly alluded (somewhat impossible to determine whether intentionally or not) to an assertion made at the turn of the 5th and 4th centuries BC by Greek philosopher Democritus of Abdera saying that „the world is a theatre, life is a play, you come, look, you come out.”² We need to concede the point to the historians of theatre, who unanimously accentuate that the comparison of life with theatre happens „virtually since the beginning of the existence of that art.”³

Following the above-mentioned reasoning it appears to be permissible to identify the institution of the town, perceived most often as the space separated from the world with a ring of walls, in which life was led in compliance with explicitly defined rules,⁴ with a huge theatre stage. Likewise, ancient Rome was many a time depicted in that manner in the literature on the subject. Its inhabitants were identified not only as spectators but also actors playing their roles in performances that both unified and separated that community.⁵ Romans-spectators marveled at the public theatre, fully expressed in the triumphant entrance of the victorious leaders to the town, take for instance the conquerors of Lucius Aemilius Paullus Macedonicus

¹ SHAKESPEARE, W. As You Like It. In Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories & Tragedies. London 1623.
in 167 BC (that entrance changed into several days' manifestation of power of the Republic). Romans – actors participated, in turn, in the political theatre, in which amuderer of Caesar Brutus summoned to Forum Romanum on the day of his commission of crime an assembly of the Roman citizens so as to convince them to his arguments. 7 Ergo the afore-mentioned oldest square of early Rome was not only a place of social meetings and exchange of information, but also a stage of the political and religious events of the immense significance. 8

Identical functions were performed by the main square of the mediaeval town. 9 It was the space of high prestige. The urban life concentrated there, people traded, met and discussed; there was a seat of local authorities as well, and finally, it was there that its regulations were introduced and main town temple was located. In the west of Europe it was most often referred to as apleace (German Platz) or aamarket (German Markt), while in Poland to aquare. 10 Indisputably, etymology of the word „square” needs to be searched in a German word Ring (Polish pierścień, Latin circulus). Nevertheless, it is somewhat striking that the above-mentioned word did not appear in the topography of the German towns. 11

Urban planning arrangement of Kraków, located in accordance with the Magdeburg law in 1257, 12 whose focal point was represented by apleace similar in shape to a square with aside almost 200 m long, is agreeably recognized as „the essence of the urban planning achievement of the towns located on the German law.” 13 The breadth of that foundation, in turn, truthfully testifies to the ambition of its founder, aduke of Kraków and Sandomierz Boleslaus the Chaste, in the plans of whose Kraków was to assume arole in Lesser Poland parallel to the one Wrocław played in Silesia. 14

The above-mentioned central square of Kraków of Great Location, covering the area of c. 40000 square metres, marked most probably in 1257, 15 for the whole period of the Middle

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7 KOCUR, M. We władzy teatru...., 39-44 (Chapter 1.3: Teatr polityczny), 47-49.

8 Ibidem..., 44-51 (Chapter 1.4: Forum Romanum jako scena) ; See also: WATKIN, D. The Roman Forum. London 2009.


10 The oldest known usage of the word square in Polish is dated at 1400, see: Słownik staropolski 8. Wrocław; Warszawa; Kraków; Gdańska; Łódź 1977 – 1981, 64. (Cso Potrasz Potraszowí dal rani, to mu ye dal, eze gi potkaw na rinku y dal mu naprzod rani) ; See also: URBAŃCZYK, S. et al. Targ. In LABUDA, G. et al. Lexicon antiquitarum Slavicarum. Wratislaviae; Cracoviae; Gedani 1977, 25-32.


15 There is every likelihood that that usage of the phrase was dictated by the fact that the oldest source note referring to the location of Kraków in 1257 – the entry in Annalis capituli Cracoviensis – was registered in that manuscript not until in 1266, see: KOZŁOWSKA-BUDKOWA, S. Annales Cracovienses priores cum calendario. In Monumenta Poloniae Historica.
Ages was gradually built up. In its south-west part, at the exit of Vistula (platea Visle) and Jewish (platea Judeorum) Street (later St Ann’s Street), assuredly at the beginning of the 14th century a Town Hall was erected, noted for the first time in 1316 in the written sources. Along with the beginning of the next century the height of the tower of the Town Hall nearly doubled to almost 40 metres, which henceforth became one of the dominant features in the architectonic landscape of the town. That monumental building, drawing by virtue of sculpture decorations to the royal foundations on the Wawel Hill, became not only a clear symbol of the position Kraków attained among other Polish towns, but also manifestation of the aspiration of the representatives of the local patriciate. Until the end of the 15th century a seat of the Kraków's local authority occupied almost half of the west part of the Main Square.

To the east of the Town Hall, in the centre of the square, merchant buildings were located, most probably in its original plan older than the Town Hall. They constituted a chain of cloth stalls, stalls and bread benches. At the end of the 14th century the Cloth Hall, a massive basilican building with the length of over one hundred metres, comprising thirty-four shops, in which cloth was merchandised, and two specialized workshops (cropping buildings) where the cloth was cropped before it was sold, was erected in that place. To the east side of the Cloth Hall, in place of the old 13th- and 14th-century stalls, at the same time a merchant building was erected, the so-called Rich Stalls a complex of sixty-four ground-floor stalls, in which minor articles, canvas and metal and haberdashery products, including articles of eastern origin, such as silk, pepper or spices, were traded. To the west side of the Cloth Hall a complex of the bread benches was placed. In the south and east part of the Main Market Square the biggest scales in Poland were located. In the Great Scale (Leaded) metal was weighed, while in the Small One (Waxen) wax, pepper, spices, as well as soap, tar, alum, sulphur and resin. On the first floor of that building Ferrier’s House was located – a merchant room in which furs could be purchased. Functioning of the above-mentioned scales was linked to the strategic position Kraków held in the Middle Ages, not only in trading in metal, especially Hungarian copper and lead of Olkusz, but also in the Black Sea trading.


16 Kraków’s Main Market Square has an extensive monograph, in its assumption popular and scientific, nonetheless, based on thorough architectonic and historical studies, see: KOMOROWSKI, W. – SUDACKA, A. Rynek Główny w Krakowie. Wrocław; Warszawa: Kraków 2008. The above-mentioned study complements it in detail. The newest findings over the elements of the building development of the Main Market Square referred to in this work as well as juxtaposition of the older literature on the subject are to be found in the studies quoted in footnotes 17-21.


On the undeveloped parts of the Main Square specialized market places were operating. The biggest of them, a chicken market, recorded for the first time in 1437, occupied the space between the north end of the Cloth Hall and the Main Market Square’s frontage. Salt and fish markets, which have been preserved in the sources of the years 1343 and 1375, were located on the west half of the Main Market Square, vis-à-vis the Town Hall. Cooper’s (1435), potter’s (1435), coal (1462) and lead (1500) markets were situated in the south part of the Main Market Square, near the building of the Great Scale. Bread (1396) and cereal (1440) markets adjoined the main parish church of the town, the church dedicated to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, occupying the north-east corner of the Main Market Square. Its high tower, surmounted in 1478 with a helmet in the shape of the crown, symbolically designated the ideological centre of the town. 21

Bearing in mind the afore-mentioned description of the building development of the Main Market Square, it seems to be uncomplicated to arrive at a conclusion that in the Middle Ages the Kraków’s Main Market Square was unquestionably a vibrant place, filled with the hubbub of those trading and their clientele. By way of illustration, “a crowd of people” (confluenza hominum) witnessed the events of 1369 when the governor Bodzęta of Kosowice, engaged then in a public dispute with the authorities of Kraków,22 appeared on the Main Square during the May fair and threw off a hat symbolizing trade freedom.23 The echo of the atmosphere of Kraków to some extent may be conveyed by the content of the town statutes issued by the town council in January in 1430, in which an instance of divulging secrets of the clerks of the Town Hall was presented. An editor of that statute heavily emphasized that it was unacceptable that stallholders, various hecklers as well as town rabble debated over matters which were discussed in the seat of the authorities.24 There is every likelihood that those discussions were held, above all, on the central square of the town, surrounded by the houses of the most affluent burgesses belonging to the so-called higher class (Oberschicht). Among them atown palace of the king Casimir the Great at the exit of Grodzka Street (platea Castri), whose front elevation in the 15th century was adorned with figures of the Polish monarchs placed in niches, must have attracted attention.25 Evidently, with a considerable simplification, we may describe adoration accompanying spectacles witnessed on the Main Square in the era of the Middle Ages.

Aside from the above-mentioned primary function of that place, performing the role of forum mercatorum, we need not overlook the fact that within its space apublic sphere permanently permeated the sacral one. Decisions of the local authorities were announced

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24 PPEKOSINSKI, F. Codex diplomaticus civitatis Cracoviensis. (KDMK) Cracoviae 1882, 307. (Und is ist unere und schande, das weyber und schrepir und trunkinbolde und allerley ungunner sullen eyns ratis heymelickeyt mawlblewen und hadirwaschen und spotted).
there, while penalties exacted. With reference to Kraków, since 1320 the capital city of the
Kingdom of Poland, its central square commenced over time to function as forum regale.
There, after all, every new monarch, inaugurating his own reign, was paid homage by his
burgesses, there as well his subjects said goodbye to his king in the funeral ceremony. Once
ayear, on Thursday after Sunday Trinitatis, Kraków’s Main Market Square changed into agreat
temple unifying all the inhabitants in the procession of Corpus Christi. Nonetheless, not
many sources have been preserved of the 13th – 15th centuries that would illustrate those
issues. Admittedly, ahistorian of Kraków has almost acomplete resource of municipal judicial
books of the time at his disposal, nevertheless, to alesser extent, he is capable of reaching
for the accounting books of the time, in which chancellery writers recorded in asequence of
numbers everyday life of the town.26

At the Main Market Square in front of the Town Hall, Kraków’s town councilors publicized
the content of the subsequent town statutes issued, i.e. acts which regulated various aspects
of life of the town. For this purpose in 1403 and 1408 burgesses were summoned with the ring
of the bell hung in the Town Hall.27 In turn, atown statute referring to the merchants arriving
in Kraków, issued in 1432 in accordance with the order of the authorities was to be written
on boards later displayed in the Cloth Hall.28

The Main Market Square was also a public place of the execution of law, serving the role
of a particularly significant instrument in charge of the municipal authorities, which, in turn,
reminded the local community of the necessity for complying with the accepted norms.
Since the corporal character was then assigned to evil, infliction of penalty in plain view
of numerous audience constituted asymbolic act of purifying the municipal
space. Therefore, communitas eliminated from its circle a person or persons that threatened
its security.29 In Kraków decapitation (beheading) was executed near the main entrance
of St Mary’s Church. There on Saturday 4th September 1406 atown councillor Andrew
Wierzynek, one of the richest and most respected patricians, charged with stealing money
from the municipal treasury, was caught in the act and sentenced to death the same day. That
unprecedented event must have shocked the public opinion and most probably for several
weeks was widely discussed. It appears to be justified to claim that Kraków’s town councilors
wished to communicate that no one was allowed to act against the municipal order, especially
those who brought it.30

At the Main Market Square the stake was as well burnt. In 1396 a woman who desecrated
the host spitting it out from her mouth on the day of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin
Mary, was burnt. From the municipal treasury eighteen groschen were paid to an executioner
on wood, three on tar, and one on straw.31 Nine years later (1405) a Jew Fetter, charged with

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26 The issue of the condition of the preserved mediaeval Kraków’s archive materials is thoroughly discussed in the
articled entitled Nad średniowiecznymi księgami rachunkowymi miasta Krakówa In Roczniki Historyczne (74) 2008, 165-
178.

27 PIEKOSINSKI, F. Registra perceptorum et distributorum civitatis Cracoviensis annorum 1390 – 1393, 1395 – 1405,
nec non 1407 – 1410. (RK) In idem. et al. Libri antiquissimi civitatis Cracoviensis ab anno 1300 usque ad annum 1400.
Cracoviae 1877, 335; Archiwum Państwowe Kraków (APK), Ms. 1594, 27.

28 KDMK II..., 286.; See also: STARZYŃSKI, M. Disponenten der Herrschaft im mittelalterlichen Krakau (in print).

29 ZAREMSKA, H. Miejsca kaźni w Krakówie w XIV – XVI wieku. In KHKM (42) 1992, 306-312, 312; see also: SPIERENBURG, P.
The Spectacle of Suffering. Executions and the Evolutions of Repression from a Preindustrial Metropolis to the European

30 APK, Acta consularia Cracoviensis, Ms. 427, 248-253, 255-259; STARZYŃSKI, M. Disponenten...

31 RK..., 313 (Nota, quod certa mulier die Assumpcionis Marie, suscepto Corpore Domini in os, emisit id in pavimentum
et pretendebat sacrilegium facere. Item pro cremacione cuiusdam mulieris primo III grossos pro pino. Item pro lignis XVIII
grossos et I grossum pro straminibus).
forging coins, died in that way as well. Before he had been executed, he was showed around the Kraków’s streets decorated with counterfeit coins.\(^{32}\) Those sentenced to banishment (those proscribed) were flogged with rods and taken around the Main Market Square before their exile, as it took place in 1383, when the proscribed Hannus Rosinhayn was accused of polygamy.\(^{33}\)

A principal role Kraków assumed at the beginning of the 14th century, when it became a place of the coronation of the Polish monarchs, a main residential centre and finally a capital of the country, exerted amarked influence on the fact that it was there that subsequent rulers of the Kingdom of Poland aday after the ceremony of coronation received homagium from the town councilors and numerous burgesses assisting them. Thus, naturally in the symbolic sphere, the reception of anew monarch by the people was held. For many it was asole occasion to look at the majesty of the ruler at least from adistance. John Długosz, an author of the greatest historiographical work which originated in 15th-century Europe, recorded that already Ladislaus the Elbow-high in 1320 was paid tribute by the Krakówians.\(^{34}\) Unfortunately, no contemporary source confirms that. There is every likelihood that the chronicler transferred acustom he knew from experience to the realities of the 14th century. Nevertheless, it is known that in the years 1434 and 1447 he was an eye-witness of two tributary ceremonies cancelled at the last moment, owing to the arguments duces of Mazovia provoked, when newly crowned monarchs were already present at the Main Market Square.\(^{35}\) In the oldest municipal copybook arch-in-details description of the oath of allegiance to the Jagiellon dynasty which the Krakówians paid to Ladislaus the Jagiellon and his newly born son Ladislaus in February 1425 has been preserved. A Royal pledge confirming the existing rights and privileges of the town was announced to those assembled sub utraque lingwa, i.e. most probably in Polish and German. Town councilors gave a pledge on the golden cross carried by the Kraków’s bishop Sbigneus Oleśnicki, while representatives of communitas rendered it by virtue of raising their fingers. Subsequently, Jagiello shook hands with every town councilor.\(^{36}\) Similarly to


\(^{33}\) KP..., 63, 611. (Item Hannus Rosinhayn, verberatus virgis cum voce preconum per totum circulum et mox de civitate prohibitus propter adulteraciones).

\(^{34}\) Annales..., lib. IX. Varsaviae 1978, 108. (In crastino vero coronacionis Wladislaus rex fascis regis vestibutus, in urbem Cracoviensem ad thronum sibi preparatum cum prelatis et baronibus descendens, girata prius urbe, a civibus Cracoviensibus ultro illud prestantibus accepit omagium et fidelitatis iuramentum).

\(^{35}\) Annales..., lib. X – XII. Varsaviae 2001, 137 (In preparatum autem sibi circa eadem pretorii non descendit thalamum, ubi consulum et civium Cracoviensium suspecturus erat subiecius, obediencie et fidelitatis iuramentum, propter liitem, que inter pontifices et Masovie duces, latus region ambientes, de superioritate et prioritate loci fuerat substituta utrisque adnintentibus se ad dexteram regis, sum ad thalamum ex equo descenderet, consessuros et pluribus racionibus, his pontificalem, illis vero ducalem prestare ducentibus dignitatem); Annales..., lib. XII. Cracoviae 2003, p. 47. (Alterae coronacionis die rex Casimirus in apparatu regio in equo ivit in circulum [...] Et dum esset prope thronum, sibi iuxta pretorium preparatum, duces Masovie Wladislaus et Boleslaus tenere dextra partem lateris regis conati ac per hoc habere locum supra pontifices alciorem sortiri, novum scisma introductum, pontificibus id non ferentibus sed in continenti factis parprios varius tracitatis a rege in domos suas discedentibus. Rex molestissime eorum discessum nec thronum sibi preparatum ascendit nec homagium a civibus cepit sed girato circulo ad castrum tristibus rediit); see also: ROKOSZ, M. Ceremonia hołdu pokoronacyjnego na Rynku Krakowskim. In SMOLUCHA, J. et al. Historia vero testis temporum. Księga jubileuszowa poświęcona Profesorowi Krzysztofowi Baczkowskiemu w 70. rocznicę urodzin. Kraków 2008, 537-552.

\(^{36}\) ESTREICHER, S. Antiquum registrum privilegiorum et statutorum civitatis Cracoviensis. Kraków 1936, 16-17,(Anno Domini moccxxwo feeria tercia post dominicam Invocavit cum sereniissimis principes dominus noster gloriosissimus rex Wladislaus baptisare fecisset filium suum inclitum Wladislaum, qui eo anno natus est ei, venit ipse cum consilio suo et pocloribus dominis huius Regni in locum ante pretorium civitas Cracouie. [...] Et fecit hanc promissionem clamari ad populum circumfusum sub utraque lingua. Propter quod placuit omni congregacioni communitatis fieri homagium et
the events of the 16th century, the monarch stood on the platform built by the Town Hall at the exit of Bracka Street, in place which in the topography of Kraków’s Main Market Square was defined as na goldzie.

The central square of the town also assumed the role of the scene of the funeral ceremonies of the late monarch. For the first time it took place on 19th November 1370 when aceremonial procession marched across the Kraków’s Main Market Square, in which Casimir the Great, deceased several days earlier on the Wawel Hill, was symbolized by ahorseman clad in golden royal robes, while money was scattered among the crowd epitomizing generosity of the monarch departing his people. During subsequent funeral ceremonies, since 1434 on, a funeral cortège with the coffin of the earthly remains of the monarch marched across the Main Square, which constituted apart of the so-called Royal route (via regia), leading from St Florian’s Gate to the castle hill.37 Ergo the space of the Kraków’s Main Market Square became in an anthropological dimension the space of the beginning and end – opening and closure of the reign under people’s very eyes.

The Main Market Square was also asacral space, over which towers of the parish church dominated. In the years 1453 – 1454 the Krakówians assembled there to hear sermons of the charismatic Italian monk, John of Capestrano, who called for conversion and change of the customs; who as well completed numerous healing processes.38 Conrad of Freystadt, who accompanied him in his missionary journey around East-Central Europe, recollected that in winter when Capestrano moved from the church dedicated to St Adalbert to St Mary’s church, people froze to death for they could not get inside the temple.39 At least since the 1380s on the day of Corpus Christi, with the sound of the trumpets, the procession wound its way around the Kraków’s Main Market Square, turning it into the great temple filled with the crowds of the faithful. The priest leaving the walls of the main parish church with the monstrance of the Holy Sacrament signified the change of the character of that feast. The sequence of the proceedings in the procession directly reflected the position individual participants took in the social structure of the town. Hence it mirrored an image of the town “in its legal, professional and financial diversification.” 40

The last quote needs to be regarded as a brief, though, apt recapitulation of the afore-mentioned deliberation on the function of the Kraków’s Main Market Square in the era of the Middle Ages, in which the town was mirrored in its legal, professional and financial diversification.

37 BORKOWSKA, U. The Funeral Ceremonies of the Polish Kings from the Fourteenth to Eighteenth Centuries. In The Journal of Ecclesiastical History (36) 1985, 513-534; STARZYŃSKI, M. Last Tribute to the King. Funeral Ceremony of the Polish King Casimir the Jagiellon (1492) in the Light of an Unknown Description (in print); see also: CHROŚCICKI, J. A. CHROŚCICKI, Juliusz. A. Przestrzeń ceremonialna w nowożytnym mieście. In KHKM (43) 1993, 213-224.


39 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. NAL 1763, f. 189v (Anno Domini 1453 tali intensissimi frigoris hiems erat, quod etiam homines in plateis morte opressit, quorum ego frater Conradus de Libera Civitate Minorum insignis, horum preclarissimum miraculorum divitus operaturam, insufficiens collector et scriptor vidit hoc fore factum ante porticum ecclesie Virginis Gloriose Cracouie diversimode, que alios plurimos invadendo suo fl atu frigido lesit).

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