

“Renaissance in the Borderlands. Cultures of Humanism  
in the Polish and Ottoman Empires”, University of Warsaw,  
Poland, 10-11 December 2014

The Council of Constance (1414-1418) was the scene of important events, including the resolution of the Great Schism, the trial and execution of Jan Hus, and the creation of Paulus Vladimiri's "just war" doctrine, which had ramifications that reached far beyond the scope of the Papacy and East Central Europe. A lesser-known impactful outcome was the initiation of Polish-Ottoman diplomatic relations. When King Sigismund of Hungary sent a letter from the Council to King Ladislaus Jagiello (Władysław Jagiełło) requesting military aid in the face of growing Ottoman power, the Polish king declined, electing, rather, to send Jakub Skarbek of Góra and an Armenian courtier named Grzegorz to Sultan Mehmed I in order to broker a peace with Hungary. The mission was a success. Thus began the official political interactions between the Kingdom of Poland and the Ottoman Empire, an event that had formative ramifications for the balance of power in East-Central Europe and the Black Sea region into the modern era.

In 2014, politicians and academics around the world celebrated the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of Polish-Turkish relations. This acknowledgement may be ahistorical given the momentous political and social changes experienced in Europe and the lands of the former Ottoman Empire since Jakub Skarbek and Grzegorz the Armenian presented themselves to Mehmed I in 1414. The occasion, however, has generated a fresh wave of interest in Polish/Turkish historical relations and given numerous opportunities for scholars to meet and ponder the significance of this long relationship. On 10 and 11 December 2014 the Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw hosted an international interdisciplinary conference organized by Giancarlo Casale (McGill University) and Valentina Lepri (University of Warsaw), co-sponsored by the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies. The conference was entitled "Renaissance in the Borderlands: cultures of humanism in the Polish and Ottoman Empires." Participants agreed that the event was remarkable not only due to the diligence of the hospitable and professional body of organizers but also due to the cohesive scope of its academic aims.

Researchers in different fields within the humanities vacillate between various methodological and chronological frameworks that allow one to interrogate the concept of "Borderlands." In the case of Polish-Ottoman studies, many are consciously or unconsciously drawn to this subject because there was a physical historical space that was shared by these two polities: borderlands in the simplest sense. At its greatest extent, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Ottoman Empire maintained a vast border that stretched some 1000 kilometers over the Pontic Steppe and west into the

heart of Central Europe, encompassing the territory in the modern nations of Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland. Client polities in the Crimean Khanate, Moldavia, and Wallachia were joined by highly autonomous frontier societies in the Budjak and among the growing power of the Cossacks in the Polish territory as independent actors as well as go-betweens for Polish-Lithuanian and Ottoman social and political structures – a recurring theme throughout the conference. Several presentations also explored the activities of less populous groups such as Italians that fled to Poland from the inquisition or the local Armenian population of Poland that acted as key interlocutors and generators of cultural material that linked these neighboring societies.

Five thematic panels met over a two-day period exploring humanistic themes of Polish-Ottoman historical relations, including geography and physicality; travel and heresy; the mediation of the frontier through language and architecture; images of the frontier in literature and politics; and the role of the Turkish “other” in Polish humanistic thought. A lively discussion during the closing roundtable focused on the notion of Empire and the study of physical and intellectual Borderlands, the discussion that the organizers hoped to engender with the conference’s provocative title. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the conference, the studies presented were informally grouped in this summary as inquiries of physicality; intellectualism; and the role of go-betweens that served as vehicles and generators of humanistic culture that bridged the spaces of the Polish-Ottoman borderlands during the Renaissance.

Both Poland-Lithuania and the Ottoman Empire considered their shared periphery to be a particularly dangerous place. Indeed, recurring fixation on violence or the threat of violence centered in the borderlands has driven past scholarship. Both Poland as the *Antemurale Christianitatis* (Bulwark of Christianity) and the *Memâlik-i Mabrûse* (The Well-Protected Domains) of the Ottoman Empire have been portrayed in the past as incompatible neighbors, or at best as unlikely allies in struggles with regional expansionist powers. Probing a bit deeper, keynote speaker Dariusz Kołodziejczyk (University of Warsaw) recalled to attendees that, in the long run, the Polish-Lithuanian and Ottoman power holders maintained an unusually satisfactory official relationship. This developed in the face of the challenges posed by the geopolitical milieu they shared with the Habsburgs/Hungary, Muscovy, Venice, and the Safavids, through fairly unique “eternal” peace accords, periods of cooperation and co-dominium in the borderlands and repeated attempts to demarcate their borders.

Called the *dzikie pola* (Wild Fields) by Poles and Ruthenians and the *Deşt-i Kıpçak* (Kipchak Wasteland) by Ottomans, these borderlands hosted multiple coinciding and overlapping frontiers, the existence of which had sweeping ramifications for the history of Europe and the Islamic world: confessional (Christian/Muslim, Latin/Orthodox, Jewish), political (republic/

dynastic empire, and also satellite and semi-autonomous polities – Cossack and Tatar), subsistence methods (settled agriculturalism/pastoral nomadism), and environmental (deciduous forest/steppe). Katharina Natalia Piechocka's (Harvard University) paper reminded us that the geographical ordering of this space was not always a simple matter for the powers that be, for whom places such as Crimea may have appeared as an island or a peninsula, an issue related to developing contemporary geographical and intellectual world views. This was a political, ideological frontier ruled by a hereditary monarch, the Ottoman Sultan, and a developing *forma-mixta* republic in the form of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The significance of this was emphasized by Danilo Facca's (Polish Academy of Sciences) study of Stanisław Orzechowski's anti-Turkish orations as a product of Italian humanism and the place of such literature in the creation of an image of Poland not as an outpost of republicanism, but rather as an island.

This borderland was exceptional not only due to its length as well as its extreme depth, which stretched if not physically, then intellectually to the distant imperial centers of the Sublime Porte and Cracow/Warsaw. The notion of physical borderlands was further complicated by attending scholars through explorations of non-physical intellectual spaces related to or shared by Polish and Ottoman societies during the Renaissance. Joanna Kostyło (British School at Rome) began this train of thought by looking at the role of Italian physicians as disseminators of medical knowledge, scientific and technological innovation as well as their involvement in local religion and politics in Poland and the Ottoman Empire. Nicole Kancal-Ferrari's (Şehir University) study of the *Demir Kapı* (the Great Portal, also known as the Iron Gate) of the Crimean Khans, a baroque edifice in the palace at Bahçesaray, presented an inquiry into the movement of concepts related to the physical Renaissance in the Polish-Ottoman borderlands.

Panelists Baki Tezcan (UC Davis), Jacek Bielak (University of Gdańsk), Valentina Lepri (University of Warsaw), Pasquale Terracciano (Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa), Giancarlo Casale (McGill University), and Michał Wasiucionek (European University Institute) reminded us that the Polish-Ottoman borderlands were the locus of confessional frontiers. The multiconfessionalism of both polities and accompanying instances of trans-imperial subjecthood between neighbors gave rise to a genus of versatile individuals with complex identities like Ali Ufki Bey/Adalbertus Bobovius, Martin Gruneweg, Domenico Mora, Bernardino Bonifacio d'Oria, Salih Celalzade, and Miron Costin. Their experiences in and perspectives of both Polish and Ottoman society, mediated by their connections to Renaissance humanism, provide us with the raw material with which we can begin to understand the connections between these neighboring polities.

The short diplomatic episode of the first Polish embassy to the Ottoman Empire in 1414 was portentous. The local geopolitical rivalries, the private initiative of frontier notables, and the role of local minority populations

as “trans-imperial” go-betweens that provided the impetus for this initial political interaction would remain central to the dynamic relations between Poland and the Ottoman Empire over the next six hundred years. Renewed interest in this topic, fostered by the initiative of scholarly bodies like Faculty of “Artes Liberales” of the University of Warsaw, will surely lead to a deeper understanding of renaissance humanism in the broader sense, and Polish-Ottoman relations in particular. The conference organizers are currently planning to feature the works of the scholars who participated in the “Renaissance in the Borderlands” in an upcoming publication and other projects related to this topic.

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