

Tomasz Wiślicz

EX-VOTOS IN THE WORLD OF OBJECTS OF POLISH PEASANTS IN THE EARLY MODERN TIMES

A concept of luxury consumption seems to be entirely inappropriate as regards the Polish peasants of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The view as to the abject poverty of that social class was one shaped by the authors of the Polish Enlightenment, who believed that impoverishment of peasants constituted an economic reason for the crisis of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Historical research has stirred slightly this reductive image. For instance, many relatively well-off peasants were found among the population of the rather infertile Subcarpathian region. Good financial status is also attributed to the peasants from the delta of the Vistula river and to the inhabitants of so called 'Dutch' villages.

Nonetheless, even in the case of those better-off peasants we are hardly able to say anything about the personal objects around them. Peasant inventories were usually made for the use of a proprietor or administrator of a given village and focused on the working tools, the stocks of grain and raw material. It is almost impossible to find any data about personal or superfluous objects with the exception of the clothing and bedclothes that occur relatively often in women's inventories, e.g. on the dowry lists. Therefore Polish peasants' material culture appears to have almost completely lacked any impractical objects, ones unconnected with work and rudimentary needs, of any ornaments, and of precious metals in any form except for money.

However, there are still unused sources that can provide some information on this matter. First off, these are the registers of miracles held in the pilgrimage or local sanctuaries, in which the ex-votos offered by the faithful were noted. Votive offering was already widely practiced in Polish sanctuaries in the sixteenth century, but it still evolved in

the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a result of great dissemination of the cult of miraculous images among common people.

The early modern era in the Commonwealth was a time of the biggest growth of pilgrimage centres, organized around the religious miraculous images, mainly the representations of the Virgin Mary. So far a scale of this phenomenon is only partially known. Aleksandra Witkowska, on the basis of published pilgrim guidebooks, found in the second half of the seventeenth century 135 pilgrim centres in the Commonwealth, and these being only of Marian devotion.¹ The number almost tripled in the eighteenth century. However, pilgrim guides covered only pilgrimage centres of a supra-local significance and scope. A separate problem area were the miraculous places attracting people from only a few parishes or even a single parish, of which there were presumably significantly more. Although a detailed study of the distribution of local sanctuaries encompasses only some of the Commonwealth regions, nevertheless it sheds a different light on their concentration. For instance, according to Władysław Szczebak, in the Tarnów diocese in 1772 were about 100 local pilgrim shrines for 230 parishes (including Uniate parishes).²

The reason for sanctuaries was their therapeutic functions and their perceived securing of good fortune. A pilgrim performed there a set of appropriate ceremonies: attending mass, confession and communion, making the votive offering and registering his/her history in the book of miracles. The ex-votos were often mentioned there, especially those of greater value. Sometimes, we can even find in the handwritten books of miracles short inventories of pilgrims' offerings, prepared on the occasion of a church visitation.

Similar in character were the lists of offerings to the parochial churches in the countryside. They registered the everyday generosity of the faithful; nonetheless this could have been provoked by extraordinary events. For example, in 1744 in the parochial church in Husów (Przemyśl diocese), a visitor found a couple of typical ex-votos offered by local peasants. This occurred in spite of the fact that Husów

¹ Aleksandra Witkowska, 'Pątnicze ośrodki maryjne w XVII w.', in Halina Manikowska and Hanna Zaremska (eds.), *Peregrinationes. Pielgrzymki w kulturze dawnej Europy* (Colloquia Mediaevalia Varsoviensia, ii, Warsaw, 1995), 204–9.

² Within the diocese's boundaries from 1983. See Władysław Szczebak, 'Zapomniane sanktuaria w diecezji tarnowskiej', *Tarnowskie Studia Teologiczne*, 9 (1983), 380–475, here 466.

was not acknowledged as a sanctuary nor was even perceived as such. The only explanation thereof could be an individual religious experience, probably recovery from illness as a result of personal devotion.³ Most objects offered to a parochial church were of some practical value from the parish's point of view. This does not mean, however, that they could not serve as ex-votos, but their symbolic significance was more complicated or simply less obvious.

And now, let us look closely at the early modern peasants ex-votos and offerings. Among them, we can distinguish three main categories of objects. Firstly, there were everyday objects associated with disease or some other problem experienced by a donor, given to the church as tokens of the grace of God received. They were usually worthless: crutches, hand-cuffs, maiden garlands, pilgrim staffs and the like, but the sanctuaries preserved them as they constituted material proof of the supernatural power residing in a given miraculous site.

The second category consists of purposely-prepared objects representing the problem of the faithful, having some monetary value from the point of view of both the faithful and the economy of the temple. This category also includes artistic objects ordered by the faithful with the intention to donate them to the church, such as the painted ex-votos, so popular in western Europe. In Poland, that kind of ex-voto did not gain much popularity. Artistic representations of miracles were usually engraved in silver or silvered plates (the richest pilgrims could also afford golden plates). Using precious metals limited the size of the image and made it schematic. The narrative of such a representation was poor in comparison with the painted ex-votos. Moreover, silver and golden plates often fell prey to theft or to reuse when the sanctuary had financial problems.

Many scholars believe that, apart from the most prosperous individuals, Polish peasants could not afford the ex-votos made of precious metals and contented themselves with waxen ones.⁴ In fact,

³ Przemysław, Archiwum Metropolitalne (hereafter: AMP), MS 167: Status et Acta visitationis ecclesiarum decanatus Jaroslaviensis, year 1744, fo. 85v; see also Stanisław Heumann, *Wiadomość o parafii i kościele parafialnym w Mucharzu w dekanacie Suskim dyecezyi krakowskiej...* (Cracow, 1889), 79–80.

⁴ Jacek Olędzki, 'Wota woskowe i srebrne w wiejskiej obrzędowości religijnej', *Roczniki Socjologii Wsi*, viii (1968), 171–88, here 178; Tadeusz Chrzanowski and Marian Kordecki, 'Wota srebrne. Z badań nad sztuką sarmatyzmu w Polsce', *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki*, xxii, 2 (1970), 209–14, here 211.

it is scarcely possible to guess the social status of the donors of preserved offering plates, unless they bear clear estate symbols, such as a sword. Written sources allow us to corroborate that silver ex-votos were more popular among the peasantry than it appears at first sight. There was a custom of group offerings, when the whole community of a village appeared as a pilgrim.⁵ For instance, during the cattle pestilence of 1752 a few pilgrimages from the surrounding villages came to the Stara Wieś (sanctuary in the Przemyśl diocese) to pray to God for protection for the herds. All the communities offered identical silver ex-votos, which depicted the Heavenly Mother being adored by kneeling people and cattle. They were probably serial products of a local craftsman, created to meet the needs of the peasants. Eight years later, the situation repeated itself, but this time the village communities chose ex-votos in the shape of heart.⁶

Apart from those communal offerings, individual peasants' ex-votos sometimes were also made of silver, although wax was likely to be the most popular material. Waxen ex-votos, and a part of the silver ones likewise, were formed into the shape of the sick part of the body, such as the eyes, arms, or legs. Figurines of children and cattle appeared as well. Such waxen offerings were being prepared by peasants from the Kurpie region still 50 years ago and we may assume that they looked like those made 300 years ago.⁷

Paradoxically, cheap waxen offerings played a greater role in the everyday economy of a sanctuary than golden or silver plates. The latter served mainly as ornaments and were recasted only in need, whereas mass waxen ex-votos were regularly gathered, then turned into candles, helping in this way to illuminate the temple, something that was always a major worry for churchwardens.

The third category contained valuable objects of a personal character, not bound morphologically to the problem of a donor. These were jewellery, garments, cloths and the like. For example, in the register

⁵ See Jacek Olędzki, 'Wota srebrne', *Polska Sztuka Ludowa*, xxi, 2 (1967), 67–92, here 73; Aleksander Jaśkiewicz, 'Złotnictwo wotywnie regionu częstochowsko-wieluńskiego. Studium z zakresu sztuki prowincjonalnej i ludowej XVII–XIX wieku', *Rocznik Muzeum Okręgowego w Częstochowie. Sztuka*, i (1982), 17.

⁶ Walerian Mrowiński, *Cudowny obraz Matki Boskiej Starowiejskiej w Ziemi Sanockiej* (Cracow, 1895), 88.

⁷ Jacek Olędzki, 'Symboliczne ofiary woskowe ze wsi Kadzidło', *Polska Sztuka Ludowa*, xvi, 2 (1962), 92–6.

of miracles from the sanctuary of the Heavenly Mother in Minoga (in the north of Cracow) we can find a testimony from 1695 given by a certain Ewa Frankowa from a neighbouring village

who was heavily ill for a year, suffered pains in her eyes, and she made a vow to give the Holy Virgin beads with 16 black ambers, for God would comfort her with intercession of the Holy Virgin. So, having received the God's grace she handed over the beads and ordered the holy mass to thank God and the Holy Virgin.⁸

It should be stressed, that offering even such simple beads was a great relinquishment for a countrywomen. They did not possess so much jewellery – for example the daughters of a rich tavern-holder, Antoni Świerkal, received only three strings of beads each in their sumptuous dowries.⁹ Moreover, most jewellery was a gift from parents or husband; thus it had also an emotional value.

It was customary among the peasant parishioners to found from time to time a petty item of church equipment. For instance, countrywomen donated various kinds of textile, probably of their own craft: tablecloths, towels, aprons for the crucifix, and so on. A supplement to the inventory of the church in Świlcza near Rzeszów from 1728 enumerates many such things:

Anna, the blacksmith's wife, gave a flaxen tablecloth with simple lace decoration, ... a *virgo* Regina Łagoszanka gave silken striped piece of drapery for the altar of the Holy Virgin; the same gave a kerchief for the image, ... *laboriosa* Anna from Ruda gave a pair of flaxen towels; *laboriosa* Regina Woytonka gave a kerchief hemmed with the black silk, etc.¹⁰

Simple peasant jewellery also belonged to the group of such offerings: necklaces and strings of beads, usually made of glass or tin, seldom silvered.¹¹ What did they do with beads in a church? They generally

⁸ Jan Wiśniewski, *Historyczny opis kościołów, miast, zabytków i pamiątek w Olkuskiem* (Marjówka Opczyńska, 1933), 167.

⁹ Bolesław Ulanowski (ed.), *Księgi sądowe wiejskie* (Starodawne Prawa Polskiego Pomniki, xi–xii, Cracow, 1921), no. 3831 (year 1754).

¹⁰ AMP, MS 160: *Visitatio generalis sub ... Alexandrii Antonii Fredro ... A. D. 1727 expeditae*, fo. 301; see also Cracow, Biblioteka Jagiellońska (hereafter: BJ), MS 274: *Księga sądowa Staszkówki 1579–1839*, fos. 105 (year 1715), 106v (1723), 130 (1757).

¹¹ AMP, MS 160, fo. 268v; BJ, MS 274, fo. 130 (year 1757).

serve as an ornament of the holy images and altars, as e.g. of the altar of the Heavenly Mother in Częstochowa. The cheap beads and necklaces were spontaneous gifts from girls who visited the shrine.

Sure enough, this third category of offered objects is the most interesting for a researcher of the material culture of the early modern Polish peasantry. Although it is hardly possible to make a generalization or to develop a quantitative approach to the problem as the data obtained from the above-mentioned sources are dispersed, they nevertheless deserve a scholar's attention, because they can serve as the basis for an analysis of the symbolic layer of the peasant's material culture. In that case, the fact that ex-votos are deeply rooted in the early modern religious belief and custom is of great value.

In considering the popular usage of objects as ex-votos we are able to distinguish a few principal ways of perceiving their meaning. Firstly, ex-voto played the role of a sign – the sign that testified to the God's grace received by the donor. Every crutch left in a sanctuary by a lame person, every silver plate and every string of beads hung at the altar radically changed their meaning with the very act of offering. In a way they became an entire narrative about a miracle. Sophisticated engravings on silver plates tried to tell whole stories about the suffering and relieving, while even a simple crutch recounted the tale of a cripple who had found his legs.

The second way of perceiving the offerings was linked to the custom of presenting material ex-votos, which could be seen as a 'barter exchange' with the supernatural world.¹² A member of the faithful begging for God's grace or giving thanks for it offered a gift, which expressed the close association between the act of offering and the favour received. Ex-voto in the shape of a hand represented gratitude for the recovery from any sickness of the hand. The offering of little silver cow was a thanksgiving for saving stock from the plague. Therefore the object offered as ex-voto fulfilled the role of a substitute (e.g. of the parts of the body) in the 'exchange' with the supernatural.

The use of morphological similarity bore the traits of magical thinking, but there was another form of perceiving the exchange with the supernatural world. A devotee could pay off God's grace by offering an item valuable enough to recompense the debt he/she

¹² Piotr Kowalski, *Prośba do Pana Boga. Rzecz o gestach wotywnych* (Wrocław, 1994), 136.

owed. Consequently, many ex-votos did not have their clear symbolic meaning; instead they were really expensive for their donors. These were, for instance, the conventional silver and golden hearts.

The motives of donors were not always purely devotional. Church offerings could also be seen as a method of achieving social prestige in a community, where the cult and ritual formed the organizational core of social life. Therefore a splendid gift was the public demonstration of one's wealth or generosity and helped to acquire fame among fellow-parishioners.

Last but not least the ex-votos and offerings were also perceived as a way of personal contact with God. We may assume such an intention in the case of offerings of little economic value but of great personal and emotional importance, like beloved jewellery, handcrafted textiles, and family souvenirs. Offering them was not intended as ostentation. It was rather an expression of deepened religious consciousness, which led to an individual attempt at entering into communication with the sacred. This attempt sometimes was not aimed at any advantage, but was rather driven by disinterested devotion and religious experience of a compassionate character. It can be observed in the customary women's offerings of their kerchiefs to the church. A kerchief (in Polish *rańtuch*) was a women's covering for the head and shoulders in the shape of rectangular shawl four cubits (i.e. forearms) long. Offered to the church, kerchiefs were used as an altar's bottom tablecloth. The custom found its parabolic explanation in the gesture of the Virgin Mary, who had wrapped her veil around the head of Christ, after his descent from the cross. And a kerchief was the equivalent to the Virgin Mary's veil in the Polish countrywoman's dress.¹³

To sum up, the question of ex-votos in the world of the early modern Polish peasantry provides some information about their extraordinary consumption, financial capabilities, and their access to silver and to artisanal products from towns. Although the data on this subject are not statistical, but rather exemplary, they can help in the analysis of the material culture of the Polish countryside.

¹³ Franciszek Kotula, 'Rańtuchy. Elementy kultury ludowej w wyposażeniu kościołów', *Nasza Przeszłość: studia z dziejów Kościoła i kultury katolickiej w Polsce*, 10 (1959), 377-90; BJ, MS 274, fo. 131 (year 1766); cf. also Cracow, Archiwum Państwowe, Dep. MS 101, pp. 71, 87 (year 1762).