

Piotr Guzowski
Institute of History
University of Białystok
Plac Uniwersytecki 1
15-420 Białystok
guzowski@uwb.edu.pl

The Peasant Land Market in Poland in the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period (15th-16th centuries) - abstract

The subject of peasant landholding and land market has been viewed in Polish historiography mainly from the legal standpoint. Legal historians have defined the character of late-medieval peasant landholdings in Polish rent economy, as “hereditary holding which took the form of customary property, similar to feudal property on the level of an inferior vassal”. Also in the early modern period Polish peasants, according to legal historians, “[...] were generally free to dispose of their holdings which were, in practice, their hereditary customary property”.

The aim of this paper is to answer the question of whether there was peasant land market in Poland in the late Middle Ages and at the beginning of the early modern period, how well developed it was, and what was its role in the peasant economy. The paper looks for evidence in the oldest Polish village court rolls which document village court sessions and contain records of land transactions made by local peasants.

Nine village court rolls have been analysed for the purpose of this paper: Nowa Wieś Łobzowska, Rajbrot, Bielcza, Brzezówka, Trześniowa, Wary, Krościenko Wyżne, Maszkienice i Wola Komborska. These villages lay in two different, though neighbouring, regions: krakowski and sanocki regions.

The number of land transactions in the sixteenth century increased in comparison with the earlier period. Detailed analysis of available data is possible for two villages – Trześniowa and Brzezówka – whose court rolls contain the largest number of recorded land transactions.

In Trześniowa, the number of recorded land transactions rises gradually during our period of study. Significant growth is visible in the second decade of the sixteenth century, but the greatest increase took place in the 1540s when an average number of 8 land transactions a year was recorded in the rolls.

The number of land transactions recorded in Brzezówka village court rolls is significantly smaller and their statistical analysis reveals a slightly different tendency from that in Trześniowa village. In Brzezówka, the largest number of entries comes from the last two decades of the fifteenth century, although in the first half of the sixteenth century the frequency of land transactions remained on a similar level. The average annual number of transactions carried out in Brzezówka is smaller than in Trześniowa and it ranges from 2 to 3 deals a year.

In other villages, the number transactions in land was reasonably smaller than in the two villages described above and it averaged 1 or 2 a year. The deals were not big in financial terms because in the fifteenth century their average value ranged from 2 (Wary) to no more than almost 7 *marcs* (Bielcza). It needs to be noted, too, that when in the first half of the sixteenth century the number of land transactions grew, their value tended to go down in comparison with the value of transactions made in the fifteenth century. The amount of money involved in land transactions increased again in the second half of the sixteenth

century. The growth was spectacular because the average value of transactions doubled and ranged from about 4 (Wary) to 13 *grzywny* (Bielcza).

Statistical analysis of land prices in particular village court rolls shows prices' diversification across time and space. They reached the bottom in the first half of the sixteenth century, but in the periods before and after this stage, prices were significantly higher and they rose to the top at the end of the sixteenth century. This fluctuation of prices was accompanied by changes in the intensity of land circulation and it can be observed that the lower the prices were the larger number of land transactions was recorded in village court rolls. Land prices depended also on where the farm lay – in *krakowski* region prices were substantially higher than in *sancoki* region.

The fact that farms held by peasants in Poland were actually their property contributed significantly to the creation and development of peasant land market. Village court rolls show clearly that such market did exist as we find in them abundant evidence regarding land divisions and transfers, in full or in parts. It was a dynamic market whose characteristics changed over time. The market's characteristics changed also across space and, certain differences between local land markets derived from their geographical location.

The changes in prices of land during our period of study have similar regularity to the changes in prices of grain. However, a quick rise in the latter began earlier and it was much sharper than in the prices of land. The prices of particular cereals at least quadrupled during the sixteenth century, whereas the prices of land only doubled.

The relations between grain and land markets become clearer when the prices of land are converted into the amount of grain that a peasant had to sell in order to get enough money to purchase the land.

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the prices of land and the prices of grain did not rise at the same pace. Thanks to this, in the second half of the sixteenth century Polish peasants would have to sell much less grain to be able to purchase additional land for cultivation than they did a hundred or a hundred and fifty years earlier. Theoretically, therefore, economic situation of Polish peasants improved greatly during our period of study.

In the second half of the sixteenth century average size of a peasant farm in many regions of Poland was half a *mansus* (8.5 hectares). Relatively high yield ratio and high grain prices at that time were the reasons why, theoretically, it did not take much time, a few years at most, for a peasant on a farm of that size, to amass enough money to enlarge his holding. However, it did not mean that peasants would necessarily buy land. What they actually did was leasing rather than purchasing the so called *pustki*, or deserted farms. The practice was widespread in, for example, Korczyńskie crown estate where peasants by leasing deserted grounds enlarged their own farms by sixty per cent. The practice was probably also partially responsible for relatively low prices of land on the market. The latter may also have been influenced by demographic and geographic factors, namely, contemporary Poland had an abundance of arable land but it suffered from the shortage of labour.