

---

PAWEŁ KRAS\*

---

**[REVIEW]:** ADAM KOZAK, *KSIĘGA SĄDOWA GNIEŹNIEŃSKICH WIKARIUSZY GENERALNYCH SĘDKA Z CZECHLA I JANA Z BRZÓSTKOWA (1449–1453, 1455). STUDIUM ŹRÓDŁOZNAWCZE I EDYCJA KRYTYCZNA, POZNAŃSKIE TOWARZYSTWO PRZYJACIÓŁ NAUK, POZNAŃ 2023, PP. LXXXV + 522 (FOLIA JAGELLONICA. FONTES 12).*

The publication by Poznań medievalist Adam Kozak is, first and foremost, a critical edition of an exceptional source material, the register kept by the Gniezno vicars general from the mid-fifteenth century. The edition comes complete with a detailed source study and extensive indexes. The original book has been preserved in the Archdiocesan Archive in Gniezno under the reference number A.Cons. A 30. As Kozak proves, the last leaf of this register was torn off in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and is currently located in the State Archive in Poznań, in the collection entitled “Documents and ecclesiastical records” with reference number 414. Additionally, during his research, Kozak found the original binding of the manuscript, which has been preserved in the Archdiocesan Archive in Gniezno, without a reference number.

The book records court proceedings conducted before the vicar general Sędek of Czechel (d. 1476) in the years 1449–1453, as well as before his successor Jan of Brzóstków (d. 1461) in 1455. It is worth emphasising that this is the only preserved court book of this type from the area of the medieval church province of Gniezno. We are dealing here with a compact document kept by an important official, the vicar general *in spiritualibus*, who supported the archbishop of Gniezno in managing the diocese and judged, within the scope of the competences granted to him, cases reserved

---

\* Paweł Kras – Professor of Medieval History at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Director of the Centre for Medieval Studies in Lublin; e-mail: pawel.kras@kul.pl; ORCID: 0000-0002-4844-1943.

for the ordinary. In the area of the late medieval archdiocese of Gniezno, as in other Polish dioceses, the office of vicar general was usually combined with the function of an official (bishop's deputy judge) and filled by the same person. For this reason, the actions undertaken by the official and the vicar general were recorded within the consistory books, of which quite a high number are extant for the fifteenth century.

The main body of the register records the activities of Sędek of Czechel, vicar general of Archbishop Władysław Oporowski, from September 1449 to 16 March 1453. Sędek was appointed to the office of vicar by Archbishop Władysław shortly after he took up his position in Gniezno, and he ended his activity shortly after the death of the ordinary. The initiative to keep the records of his activities belonged to Sędek of Czechel, an extraordinary person well known to historians. After studies in Kraków and Paris Sędek emerged a well-trained theologian. He was an important figure of the Church of Greater Poland, holding the office of canon of the Gniezno cathedral for a long time and actively involved in pastoral activities in the Gniezno archdiocese. His contemporaries remembered him as a person of wide erudition, and at the same time pious and modest. It is worth mentioning that Sędek was also a historiographer and author of a historical compilation, the so-called *Annals of Sędziwoj*.

The register kept by the Gniezno vicar general is the most important source that sheds light on Sędek's ecclesiastical activity and also says a lot about his pastoral training and spirituality. The court cases recorded in Sędek of Czechel's register have been grouped into three separate sections, according to the category of offenses. The first and the most extensive section (pp. 1-77) opens with cases concerning the clergy (500 cases in total) and records both violations of canon law by the clergy regarding offences of a moral nature (e.g. concubinage, murder, assault, etc.) and acts against the clergy (disputes over tithes, assault on a clergyman). The second section registers matrimonial cases (*causae matrimoniales*, A.Cons. A 30, pp. 78-105; 238 cases in total), while the third one contains proceedings related to religious offences (*causae fidei*, as mentioned earlier, preserved in the State Archive in Poznań in the collection entitled "Documents and records of churches" with reference number 414, pp. 1-7). The book registering Sędek's activities was prepared with great care. Blank pages of the register between the first and the second section of Sędek's register contain entries for cases

conducted in 1455 by his successor Jan of Brzóstków, who in the years 1454–1456 held the office of vicar general *in spiritualibus* of Archbishop Jan Sprowski, and in the earlier and later period held other functions in the administration of the archdiocese. As calculated by Kozak, Jan's activities constitute 18.5% of the content of the entire book. His analyses show that in the case of entries related to Sędek's activities, we are dealing with a clean copy, and all of the material was meticulously recorded, with a small number of deletions and corrections. The cases conducted by Jan of Brzóstków were entered less carefully. Moreover, unlike Sędek's book, in which the most important parts of the proceedings conducted orally were recorded in summary form, the entries in the part concerning Jan of Brzóstków's activities imitate the documentation of officials in terms of structure, containing, among other things, extensive depositions of witnesses and the accused.

In Poland, but not only there, the value of the material gathered in this register is unique, but Kozak's book contains insights outside Polish history, too. On the one hand, the book sheds light on the functioning of the office of the Gniezno vicar general and the procedure for judging and registering cases. On the other hand, it is a primary source for studying the customs and everyday life of Polish society in the mid-fifteenth century. The cases recorded in it say a lot about both the parish clergy and the laity. We learn about the condition of parish priests and vicars, their moral and disciplinary transgressions, as well as pastoral negligence. We also have the opportunity to learn about the actions taken by clerical superiors, in this case the vicars general, who tried to discipline the clergy and improve the quality of their service. Moreover, the register of the Gniezno vicars general is an excellent source for studying Church ministry and its effects in the fifteenth-century archdiocese of Gniezno. It shows the growing supervision that church authorities had over the observance of church law and the principles of Christian morality among the laity, which can be best seen in cases concerning violations related to the sacrament of marriage. The interests of the church courts in these cases reflects growing concern among church officials of the need to discipline parish life, but it also shows that lay people and churchmen at the parish level became increasingly aware of these efforts. Of particular value are the cases concerning faith (*causae fidei*) recorded in the final part of the book, which were heard before the tribunal of Sędek of Czechel. In previous studies, this part

has been the best known, because most of the cases contained in it were published by Bolesław Ulanowski in his monumental edition of *Acta capitulorum nec non iudiciorum*, which was supplemented in 1920 by Adolf Kunkel. This part of the documentation includes procedural actions taken by the Gniezno vicar general against people suspected of heresy. Most of them are related to people who, contrary to church prohibitions, stayed in Bohemia. The authorities of the Polish Church, accepting the papal decrees, recognised Bohemia as a country under the control of the Hussites that should be avoided by Catholics. A stay among the Czech Hussites, even a short one or one connected with transit to Italy, was forbidden and entailed excommunication. Polish church legislation, since the provincial codification of Wieluń–Kalisz in 1420, required all persons returning from Bohemia to appear before the bishop or an official appointed by him in order to explain the circumstances of their stay in the areas occupied by heretics and to swear an oath of allegiance to the teachings of the Roman Church. The cases recorded in the register of Sędek of Czechel are the key source confirming the implementation of these provisions in the Archdiocese of Gniezno. A dozen or so individuals, clergy and lay people, who had been in Bohemia, were summoned to his tribunal. Some of them, as this documentation records, took an oath of loyalty to the Catholic doctrine, renouncing any connections with Czech heretics. Others admitted to contacts with the Hussites, which included participation in Utraquist services, listening to sermons by Hussite priests, and receiving the Eucharist under both kinds. The summary and very concise record of activities conducted in matters of faith confirms the Poles' travels to Bohemia and reveals one of the channels of transmission of Hussite ideas in Polish society. However, in a very limited way, it also sheds light on the views of people suspected of heresy and the motives for their participation in religious practices prohibited by the Church. As the preserved documentation indicates, Sędek of Czechel was not the type of fanatical inquisitor who tried to eradicate heresy related to his stay in Bohemia and pro-Hussite sympathies by means of severe punishments. He acted as a caring pastor who treated violations of the Church's prohibitions on travel to Bohemia with pastoral leniency. It was enough for him that a suspect admitted guilt and expressed remorse. The case documentation included declarations condemning Hussite

practices and critically assessing the situation in Bohemia under the rule of heretics.

In earlier studies on the influence of Hussitism in Poland, much attention has been paid to the group of Utraquists operating in Pakość under the protection of the owners of the town, Materna Leszczyc and his wife Anna. From the selective edition of the documentation recorded in the register kept by Sędek of Czechel, it was possible to learn about Anna's pro-Hussite sympathies and her role in protecting priests administering Communion to the laity under both kinds. It was also possible to find information about the conflict with vicar Abraham, who denounced in public heretical activities of Utraquists from Pakość. In the part of the book recording the activities of Jan of Brzóstków, there are records of extensive testimonies given in the trial of Stanisław, a parish teacher in Pakość, who was accused of gathering and distributing vernacular texts. In this edition prepared by Adam Kozak, a complete set of records concerning this case has been published for the first time, which significantly supplements the knowledge about the nature of the charges brought against Stanisław, and also shows in a new light the conflict between the owners of the city and vicar Abraham. The now-complete picture of this one case provided by Kozak's edition shows clearly the benefits of publishing complete source documentation.

The register of the Gniezno vicars general Sędek of Czechel and Jan of Brzóstków, published by Adam Kozak, is a model of the high-quality editorial standards which should be adopted in future editions of court books. This extensive book, which contains 826 entries, has been provided with carefully prepared indexes (personal, geographical and thematic), which offer a helpful research tool in browsing such rich source material. Each entry is preceded by a detailed summary in Polish. It is however regrettable that the registers were prepared only in Polish, as the short English summary describing the entire publication only allows for a small understanding of the contents of this unique court book.

The extensive introduction, over 100 pages long, deserves recognition, as it provides a monographic study of the history of the register, discussing the circumstances of its production and content. Kozak offers a source analysis with great insight, reconstructing the original structure of the book and the technique of its maintenance. Thanks

to this, he is able to analyse in a new way the activities of the Gniezno vicars general, the scope of their competences and the mechanism of conducting court cases. The reconstructions of the biographies of the book's creators, Sędek of Czechel and Jan of Brzóstków are extremely valuable, supplementing and sometimes correcting the knowledge about them available in the literature to date.

The critical edition of the register of the Gniezno vicars general from the mid-fifteenth century, together with the preceding source study, constitutes an excellent achievement on the part of Adam Kozak, thanks to which an extremely valuable and previously little-known source on the religious culture of late medieval Poland has been made available for research. I have no doubt that it will become a standard for studies on the evangelisation processes taking place in the Polish society in the fifteenth century. The commitment of Sędek of Czechel and Jan of Brzóstków in fulfilling the tasks entrusted to them by the Archbishops of Gniezno, combined with their foresight in documenting their own activities, led to the creation of an exceptional text among church court books, giving us insight into the difficult-to-grasp sphere of beliefs, customs and religious practices of parish communities and the tense relations between the clergy and the laity.