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Uniate wooden churches in Podlasie 1596-1875.

Changes in the architecture and interior furnishing.

Summary

The aim of the dissertation was to present the stages of changes that took place in the architecture and interior furnishing of the wooden Uniate churches in Podlasie due to the influence of the Western culture and Latin liturgy.

Only 25 wooden churches that were originally the Uniate churches survived until today in the historical voivodship of Podlasie. This was, among other factors, due to the poor durability of wood used as a building material (on average every 100/150 years an old church was replaced with a new one). Most of the Latin interior elements did not survive either, as they were removed due to the demolition of the Union of Brest in 1839 and 1875. Therefore, the dissertation is based predominantly on the written sources from the 18th and 19th centuries, which allowed for recreation of images of buildings that had ceased to exist decades ago.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, Podlasie was inhabited by the followers of the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox Church. After the Union of Brest in 1596, almost all Orthodox parishes followed its rules. In the 17th century, and especially in the 18th century, the Uniate Church liturgy and interior furnishing were heavily influenced by the Roman Catholic Church. Typical Catholic church furniture like tabernacles, wall altars, pulpits, confessionals and organs started to appear. This process was noticeable in the Uniate churches throughout the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, although its course and extent varied. In Podlasie, it took over 150 years and lasted almost until the full integration of the Uniate and Catholic interior furnishing, which occurred in the beginning of the 19th century.

In the architecture of the Uniate churches in Podlasie, the prolonged duration of the traditional Eastern patterns is visible, i.e. the cross-centred layout and the three-part layout (consisting of a chancel, nave and vestibule). This trend was predominant in the construction of the wooden Uniate churches up until 1720s. It was only in the first half of the 18th century that the Uniate churches, described in sources as similar to Catholic churches, were built. They were covered with a common roof and had their chancel terminating on three sides. In the second quarter of the 18th century, two-tower churches appeared, and basilica-type churches appeared in the third quarter. At the end of the 18th century, the octagonal floorplan gained popularity, which followed the pattern from the Warsaw Church of Dormition of the Mother of God, designed by the royal architect Dominik Merlini.

Much earlier than in the architecture, the Latin influence became visible in the interior furnishing of the Uniate churches. First, probably no later than in the first half of the 17th century, the main altar with the tabernacle was introduced. Then followed the side altars, which were present in the majority of the Uniate churches in the first quarter of the 18th century.

During this time, the Byzantine and Roman Catholic elements of interior coexisted. In almost every place of worship an iconostas was present. With time, however, iconostases became less frequent, as the main altar with tabernacle had to be unveiled, which was in line with the rules propagated by the Roman Catholic Church.

In the first quarter of the 18th century, pulpits, pews, confessionals and baptismal fonts started to appear. In the second half of the century, there was a clear tendency to expand old churches by adding sacristies and choir galleries, which until then was rarely found in the architecture of the Uniate churches. This was often related to the changes in the interiors and replacing iconostases with new altars. However, the tradition was not completely rejected, and some old interior elements – very often icons - were still brought by parishioners to the new Uniate churches. Despite the decreasing popularity, iconostases were still present in several Uniate churches in 1830s.

Undoubtedly, the greatest impact on the Uniate churches in Podlasie came from the founders, who made final decisions on the shape of architecture and interiors. In the 18th century, the aristocratic families of Branicki, Ossoliński and Sapieha left their mark in Podlasie. The Uniate churches built by them were often designed by professional architects, and majority of the interior elements were typically Catholic. At the same time, the sources also note churches founded by bourgeoisie, and among those were places of worship following the traditional Eastern Christian layout solutions. The longest-functioning iconostases have been preserved in the Uniate churches in Czyże and Nowoberezowo, where the parishioners (peasants) proved their exceptional attachment to tradition by resisting the demolition of the Union of Brest in 1839.

This dissertation is accompanied by the catalogue illustrated with archival and modern photographs, and listing over 200 wooden Uniate churches that were present in Podlasie during the period of the Union of Brest.