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The Map of Old Wet Poland: Re-Storying Wetlands

Abstract. This paper arguments that despite the historical and political contexts of the nineteenth century period and the military intentions of *The Map of Old Poland's* [Karta Dawnej Polski] original creators, this source now represents not only the nationhood narrative but also a complex story of wetlands. Due to time constraints and limited resources, the authors did not index forests or other environments in this map, except from aquatic objects. Therefore, we received a rich source containing over 3,700 hydronyms in Polish, including rivers, swamps, bogs, marshes, lakes, and larger bodies of water, some of which no longer exist or are now known only by foreign names. After indexing them for a new digital edition prepared by the Spatial History Lab in the Department of Historical Atlas, this paper envisages how to study such rare cartographical data within the frame of environmental history and the renewed interest in wetland restoration across a drying Europe. Particularly, the eastern parts of the former Polish Kingdom preserved on *The Map of Old Poland*, stretching from north to south, offer several valuable examples that are case studied in this article.

The author examines historical knowledge about the mapping of wetlands and how these areas were discussed by comparing travelogues and geohistorical sources from both the relevant period and selected contemporary texts. Where appropriate, the author adds commentary on what happened with these mapped wet territories, how and when they disappeared, and which have survived as protected reserves. To focus specifically on wetlands as subjects of environmental history, the author applies an aquacritical theory to investigate these unbound lands of old Poland and their stories, which extend beyond what is known about the hydrological regimes of historical states (the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the conquering empires of Russia, Prussia, and Austria). By recognising the ecological layer as a form of wetland sovereignty within the map, their histories and memories are restored. This approach's ambition is to complement our patchy knowledge of the trajectories of environmental transformations and the scale of aquatic ecosystems loss.

However, this paper traces only selected wetlands through their hydronyms, meaning that the scope of the study is limited to extracting specific histories. Still, further research is needed to compare other cartographical sources from the period for a deeper overview of wet heritage and for collecting and comparing more wetland hydronyms and their cartographical representations.

Keywords: Karta Dawnej Polski, wetlands, hydronyms, aquacritical cartography, blue environmental history

1. Introduction

Karta Dawnej Polski z przyległemi okolicami krajów sąsiednich według nowszych materyałów, na 1/300000 [*The Map of Old Poland with neighbouring states' areas according to recent sources, 1:300,000*], abbreviated later in the text as *The Map of Old Poland*, was published in 1859 in Paris when Poland was divided between Habsburg Monarchy, Prussian Kingdom, and Russian

Empire as the result of partitions (1772–1795). Also known under the name of its first and longest working creator, General Wojciech Chrzanowski's map is the only topographic map of Poland within its historical borders developed and published by Poles on emigration.

Wojciech Chrzanowski (1793–1861) was a military strategist and November Uprising (1830–1831) participant. After he and other officers unsuccessfully revolted against Russian

occupation in Warsaw, Chrzanowski decided to emigrate to Paris. Although it is not sufficiently established what he and the emigration wanted to have on the map, according to the Polish Biographical Dictionary (Pawłowski, 1937, pp. 463–467), Chrzanowski communicated the first ideas of such a map in 1833. He wanted a map mainly against Russia and he treated it as the most important work of his life to prepare and edit the map of pre-1789 Poland (Pawłowski, 1937, p. 466). Initially being prepared for military aims (Olszewicz, 1921, p. 182; Siwicka, 2015, p. 31) for the future operations which General Chrzanowski could have led, although the main (liberal and aristocratic) fraction of Polish emigration localised in Hôtel Lambert in Paris was against another uprising, counting on the war between the empires that partitioned Poland.

The first 38 map sheets were published between 1840 and 1848. After the 1848 Springtime of Nations, there was a 10-year break in work on the map, including perhaps some financial difficulties, and the last sheets were prepared by Feliks Wrotnowski (1803–1871) – a journalist, translator and editor, and a director of the Polish Library in Paris (Duży & Panecki, in press). In sum, *The Map of Old Poland* contains 48 sheets, and it looks like Polish cultural elites in France decided to publish the map for other reasons than military. Since they could not update the information in the field and prepare a new map, they patchworked mainly three other maps of historical Poland to create a “simulacrum” (Siwicka, 2018, p. 76) of the country in its old borders from before 1772: from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, from the Dnieper to the Odra River. These are three maps prepared: 1) in Austria: Liesganig's map, 2) in Prussia: Engelhardt's map, and 3) in Russia: Szubert's map – all listed by Olszewicz (1921, p. 178). Chałubińska gave a list of other possible cartographic sources used as a template for *The Map of Old Poland* (1986, pp. 456–457, f16). Recently, this historical cartographical source has been studied as a nationalistic “political manifesto” (Zajac, 2020, p. 332), but it also contains other valuable contents that were intentionally included in the military intended use, although have not received much scholarly interest yet.

Because of the historical and political instances of the nineteenth century period, as well as the

military intentions of the first creators, such as General Chrzanowski's, *The Map of Old Poland* has so far been communicated as a map – to use an adequate frame – “highly dependent on the context” (Zarycki, 1998, p. 74), namely political history. Notably, Szalkiewiczówna (1964) undertook “an attempt to evaluate the system of water courses shown in General Chrzanowski's map” (p. 51), but concluded that the map contains numerous errors already identified by Olszewicz (1921). As a geographer, Szalkiewiczówna sought hydrographic accuracy and determined that the *Topographic Chart of the Kingdom of Poland* [*Topograficzna Karta Królestwa Polskiego*] is far more precise (p. 57).

Contemporary wetlands are defined as “areas that are inundated or waterlogged, vegetated or not (for example, forested swamps, bare floodplains) from which we removed open water ecosystems (for example, rivers, reservoirs and lakes)” (Fluet-Chouinard et al., 2023, p. 287). The author of this article rereads those contents of *The Map of Old Poland* that now represent neither the nationhood narrative, nor hydrographical precision, but, as she argues, a complex microhistories of wetlands for which the map is one of the possible sources – for equipping environmental history with cartographical contexts for interpretation. Then, we can ask what will it change for the discussion on the wet archives of nature? When the wetlands were visible and when not? When did they resist human impact and when were they instrumentalised (as during military actions)? And because the creators of *The Map of Old Poland* did not index forests or other environments, except from aquatic objects, therefore we can investigate closer the wetlands' representation. The template used by them was Szubert's map to cover the most of the historical territory of pre-partitioned Poland and Szubert's map did not include forests, whereas other maps were not available for the map's creators who were in Paris at this time (Duży & Panecki, in press). Simultaneously, this map could be insufficient for military purposes, since forests were strategic in the nineteenth century guerillas. But also perhaps, the awareness of temporariness of forests and rising deforestation during the wars could have influenced the general tendencies of forests' indexation during that period in other maps like Szubert's as well. Wetlands (included in *The Map of Old Poland's*

legend) were sometimes combined with forests (e.g. the sheet “Białystok”) but the map did not show it straightforwardly, therefore this problem requires more investigations for scholars interested in the woodlands’ history. Wrotnowski, who finished the map, also explained that forests were not indexed in such a huge cartographical project because they were “bardzo uległe zmianie” [very amenable to change] and not

properly drawn by previous cartographers (Wrotnowski, 1859, p. 40).

As a result, what truly distinguishes *The Map of Old Poland* is that we received a rich source that now serves as a unique record of mapped waters and their toponyms used within the former Polish monarchy, containing over 3,700 hydronyms (mostly in Polish), including rivers, swamps, bogs, marshes, lakes and larger

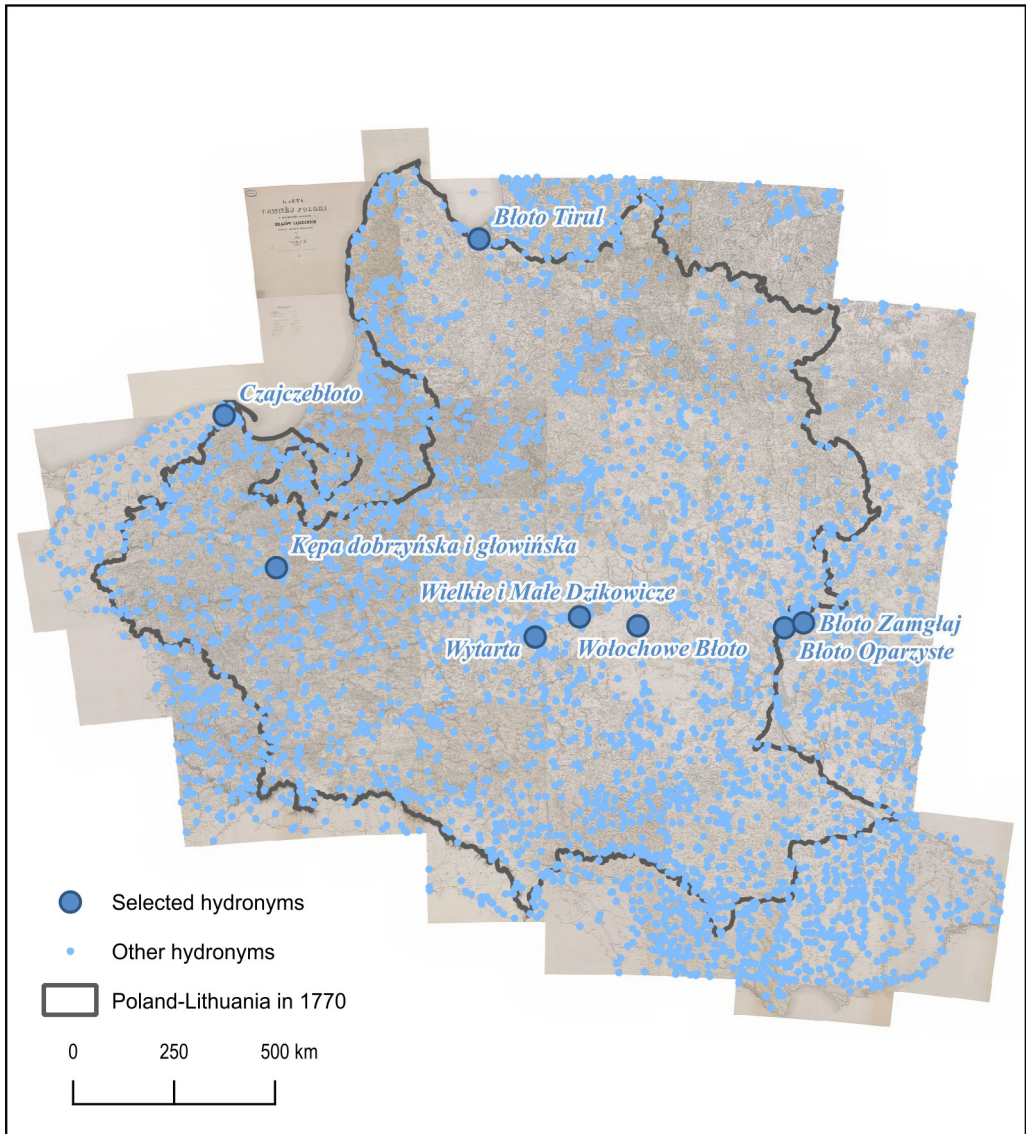


Figure 1. Visualisation of all and case studied hydronyms on *The Map of Old Poland*

bodies of water, some of which do not exist anymore or are known by foreign names. After indexing them for a new digital edition prepared by the Department of Historical Atlas at the Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History (2025; Panecki, et al., in press), the author repositions these cartographical data in the frame of environmental history and the growing field of knowledge on wetland restoration in Europe (Figure 1). Particularly, the eastern parts of the former Polish Kingdom preserved on *The Map of Old Poland*, stretching from north to south, offer many valuable examples that are case studied in this article. The author compares historical knowledge about these precious wetlands by juxtaposing travelogues and geo-historical sources, and, where relevant, discusses what became of these areas, how and when they disappeared, or which have survived as nature reserves.

This approach is referred to here as “re-storying” *The Map of Old Poland*’s wetlands. The author first reflects on how the theory of wet cartography can honour the aquatic past by restoring the value of these important ecosystems; and secondly, how this perspective contributes new ways of storytelling to the present-day histories of the transformed waters of old Poland. Unlike historical geography, which also uses old maps to reconstruct and study human impact on environments (for example, Szady, 2018, p. 133), this approach recognises *The Map of Old Poland*’s problematic status: it represents an imagined, political territory of a non-existing state. Inspired by literary scholars (Rybicka, 2021; Siwicka, 2018), the author develops a framework for narrating such sources as eco-cultural objects. Knowing that cartography has entered the ecological debate (Tally & Battista, 2016), *The Map of Old Poland*’s cultural and understudied contexts can redirect us from what was politicised in the past (e.g. borders) to what is politicised now (e.g. waters), from macro- to micronarratives of the past connections to natural environments preserved in pictorial signs and script, as follows.

2. Wet cartography: on the trail of neglected wetlands

Wetlands have long been of interest to cartographers due to their environmental signifi-

cance for monarchs and military strategists. Since early-modern times, all kinds of wetlands have been documented to aid in developing trading routes and roads for travellers, as well as to mark them as unruly, waterlogged obstacles. For example, one of the oldest maps depicting the wetlands of Polesya in Polish cartography is Daniel Zwicker’s (1612–1678) *Paludum Polesiae Tabula*, engraved in 1650 by Wilhelm Hondius (Kozica, 2014). However, the value and rarity of this source is not followed-up by any substantial analysis of hydrogeographical contents of these marshes (there) for environmental history. The same relates to *The Map of Old Poland*.

In comparison to other cartographical sources of old swampy Poland, the major change in hydroengineering politics introduced during the reign of the last king of Poland, Stanisław August Poniatowski, influenced the release of these maps (Graf et al., 2008, pp. 14–15; Łotysz, 2022, p. 38; Pospiszyl, 2023). Many hydrographical maps created between 1764 and 1795 have disappeared (Graf et al., 2008, p. 15), yet it remains clear, for example, in Karol Perthées’s *Carte hydrographique de Pologne* (1809), that the historical territory of Poland was dominated by vast wetlands localised in Polesya. Due to the scale and single-sheet format of this map, few names are mentioned, except for the largest areas such as “Wychód Błoto” (in the Pripyat River basin), “Błoto wor” (between the Bug and the Pripyat Rivers), “Bachorz Błoto” near Inowrocław, and “Maszyńskie Błoto” between Kościan and Moszy (in the Obra River basin). These are rare but valuable hydronyms that were preserved because, in comparison to rivers and water reservoirs like lakes, wetlands are not regularly named on maps, or their names tend to be less official than those of other geographical objects due to their long history of drainage and transformation.¹

The scientific value of mapping wetlands using *The Map of Old Poland* is enhanced by the nineteenth century hydrographic sources, from which, again, not all have survived, and

¹ Muddy hydronyms can be also found in the *Topographic Chart of the Kingdom of Poland* (*Topograficzna Karta Królestwa Polskiego*, 1839–1843, see also Kuna et al., 2024), commonly referred to as ‘the Quartermaster’s Map’ for example, in the area close to East Prussia as “Łosia Woda”, “Płodownica” or “Klonowe” or “Noskowe Błoto”.

those who did, primarily concentrate on indexing navigable rivers. Namely, Tadeusz Czacki's maps, which were devoted to developing transport via rivers (Danowska, 2022, p. 128), including his *Mapa hydrograficzna Polski i Litwy*;² *Carte hydrographique de la Pologne* by Jgnacy Domeyko (1838);³ *Gidrografičeskaâ karta Carstva Pol'skago* (1850);⁴ Jan Topolnicki's *Mapa Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej* (1862);⁵ and Walery Kopernicki's *Mapa hydrograficzna dawnej Słowiańszczyzny. Część zachodnio-północna* (1882) are all sources for the environmental history of waters but *The Map of Old Poland* covers all pre-partitioned territories with their hydrographic representations because of General Chrzanowski's military interest in mapping all wetlands.

The potential strategic function of wetlands for military operations is further evidenced by brochures published by General Chrzanowski in Paris between 1835 and 1837 (Pawłowski, 1937, p. 467), which discuss, for example, the tactics of guerrilla warfare (Chrzanowski, 1835). Chrzanowski also edited a collection of texts on the art of war that included theories from other military leaders regarding the use of wetlands. Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz, reflecting on the Napoleonic wars, argued that wetlands could pose even greater obstacles than major rivers because preparing for a crossing required more time. Wetlands, he noted, often formed formidable defensive lines (Chrzanowski, 1844, pp. 132–133). Unlike rivers, Chrzanowski observed, wetlands were far more dangerous and crossing them risked significant losses of troops (p. 133). He also referenced floodplains as strategic elements in operations,

especially in lowland regions like the Netherlands, or when wetlands became inundated (pp. 133–134, 183).

Thanks to the former military interest in mapping wetlands, cartography is part of environmental history studies and, both as a document and source for further cultural analysis, can support wetlands restorative practices. This blue strand in environmental history on wetlands has strong representatives abroad (e.g. Blackburn, 2007; Giblett, 2021; Gruppuso, 2018; O'Gorman, 2021), and also in Poland. So far, the most interdisciplinary study on wetlands in relation to Polish environmental history was written by a historian of technic, Łotysz (2022), and I extensively refer to this opus magnum on the Pripyat marshes, though not as extensive as this book deserves. The other valuable sources on history of interdisciplinary research conducted in the Polesya swamp basin, including mapping the peatlands in the interwar period, are discussed by Żurek (2016). More sources on the history of wetlands contextualized within the political ecology can be found in Pospiszył's publication (2023) and in Gruppuso's multispecies anthropology (2018).

But at the same time, *The Map of Old Poland* can mark wetlands where they did not exist in any rich ecological sense or where they were threatened. For example, by implementing centralised irrigation projects for agriculture, the leaders of the militarist state of Prussia were draining all muddy territories and were more interested in feeding the army than building military strategy. This environmental context of history poses another task – to recognise a cultural value of wetlands outside of the hydrological regimes of historical states. For this purpose, I use the term “wet cartography” to broaden the discussion on the hydrographical heritage and include – what I have elsewhere framed as “the aquacritical perspective” (Barcz, 2024, p. 18) – a targeted cultural focus on wetlands, here only flagged as a promising area for future alliance with restoration ecology. By appearing in old maps, the aquacritically studied wetlands, both ontologically and epistemologically, can reinforce studies on, for example, their material and visualised history of disappearance and re-emergence; evidence the development of hydroinfrastructure and reveal cultural reasons for their marginalisation. Such research may even be categorised as a form

² It is mentioned by Rastawiecki (1846) in the last section of enlisting hydromaps (“Mappy wodne”) but according to other historians of cartography, Czacki based this legendary map on Perthées's map from 1785, see, e.g. Danowska, 2022, p. 130. No information on mapped wetlands found there.

³ Signed inside the frame in Polish: “Mappa wód Polski według Engelhardta, Suchtelena, Liesganika etc. pracą i nakładem Ignacego Domeyki Paryż 1838” (Domeyko, 1838). This map was commented by a historian of geography as one of the first sources where Domeyko wanted to express the individual character of Polish lands (Chałubińska, 1969, pp. 178–180). Again, wetlands were not part of this analysis.

⁴ Mentioned in Dudzicka and Grzybowska (2000, p. 194) that it was aimed at indexing navigable rivers.

⁵ This one is particularly interesting because it uses dark green patches to mark all wetlands (“Bagna Pińskie” and other unnamed riparian plains are visible).

of “counter-mapping” (Rybicka, 2021, p. 41), illustrating how we renegotiate the meaning of wet environments found in old maps to imagine geographical pasts and futures across time, people, and circumstances. The following empirical section of this article demonstrates this idea: how *The Map of Old Poland* can serve in these counter-cartographical, wetland-centered practices.

3. Empirical material with commentary literature

The Map of Old Poland and its key to symbols (Sheet V. Połonga) already contains wetlands as strategic parts of natural environment for the military headquarters and any army leaders. What we know about General Chrzanowski and his theories on warfare and guerrilla tactics lends support to the assumptions that the map was originally conceived as a military project. Wetlands such as the Pripyat marshes, for instance, took part in fights in 1831 and 1863 (Łotysz, 2022, pp. 45–46). Therefore, many of *The Map of Old Poland*'s sheets, especially those of the former eastern territories, mark wetlands without assigning them specific names, though not all of these wetlands were ever formally named. Some were known by their non-hydronymic labels, such as “Ruda”, a reference to swamp ores where iron was once extracted (Pawłowski, 1917, p. 79). Similarly, the environmental contexts are also considered by scholars who reconstruct “lost” hydronyms and explain their etymology, for example, in relation to local extraction sites and historical industries (Solarz & Krocak, 2016, p. 351).

Therefore, one of the direct methods of aquacritical reading of any cartographical source consider this layer that some wetlands are represented by their hydronyms. *The Map of Old Poland*'s hydronyms, especially in the former eastern parts of the historical Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, are particularly rare and represent many aquatic objects despite the changes in political borders. In the case of wetlands, however, restoration goes even deeper – many of these areas simply do not exist anymore, and those that remain demonstrate just how vulnerable they are to the complex politics of Central-Eastern European, from nineteenth century imperialism and subsequent re-natio-

nalisation, to centralising state policies and Soviet-era economic control.

In Polish and other Slavic languages, wetlands are known by various synonymous names like “bagna, błota, moczary, trzęsawiska” (Pawłowski, 1917, p. 137). In the past, these landscapes were often associated with backwardness and seen as areas in need of cultivation (Łotysz, 2022, pp. 11–29). When Poland regained its independence in 1918, the Pripyat marshes (“Błota Poleskie”) remained the largest wetland region in Europe. Other significant wetlands were located along rivers like the Narew, Bug, Odra, Barycz, Noteć, Warta, Dniestr, and Dźwina, as well as in areas formed by disappearing lakes (Pawłowski, 1917, pp. 137–138). Many authors, though, as Łotysz (2022) showed in detail for the interwar hydraulic period, emphasised the need to drain and canalise these vast wet areas to serve the modern state. This is another argument why the empirical material in *The Map of Old Poland* is valuable in documenting the vulnerability of wetlands; additionally, we can see the extent of these aquatic areas in relation to historical residential networks. We know that the fastest were the wetlands drained in the regions annexed by Prussia, the latest – in Russian territories (Łotysz, 2022, pp. 35–36).

Polesya is the most thoroughly studied area in terms of its geomorphological features as a wetland landscape within historical sources. Shaped like a “bowl” by the Pripyat River basin, this area is fed by numerous tributaries, resulting in extensive flooding and making it one of the wettest and least habitable regions of the Polish lands (Pawłowski, 1917, pp. 74–75). The traditional language used to describe these wetlands offers insight into how problematic and expansive, in a way, the Pripyat marshes were. For example:

“In certain places along the rivers and on some watersheds, these marshes become more and more extensive, pushing out even the forests, merging together, and eventually forming an endless, green muddy plate, devoid of trees, called ‘halo’, meaning bare mud” [*Gdzieniegdzie nad rzekami, gdziegdzie zaś na działach wodnych stają się owe błota coraz obszerniejsze, wypierają nawet lasy, łączą się ze sobą i tworzą ostatecznie nieprzebraną, zieloną płaszczyznę błotną, pozbawioną drzew, a zwaną halo, t.j. gołe błoto*] (Pawłowski, 1917, p. 77).

Preserved in Józef Chelmoński's landscape and rural paintings, such as *Jesień* [Autumn] (Chelmoński, 1875) or *Stóg na Pińszczyźnie* [Haystack near Pinsk] (Chelmoński, 1899), and enlisted in travelogues by their names, "Białe", "Dubowe", "Dzikie", "Dziki Nikor", "Hało", "Hryczyńskie", "Jasień", "Kaczajskie", "Łuchy Chot. – Czucz.", "Moczulskie", "Moroczno", "Pohoń", "Prypecko – pińskie" (Marczak, 1935, index),

these Polesyan unruly wetlands are sentimentalised in historiographies, especially that they were believed by Józef Piłsudski to stop Russia's invasion (Łotysz, 2022, p. 299). Today, the remaining wetlands are valued for their ecological significance, transforming what was once considered empty wasteland a century ago (there) into protected natural reserves. For instance, the eastern transborder region of the Pripyat–

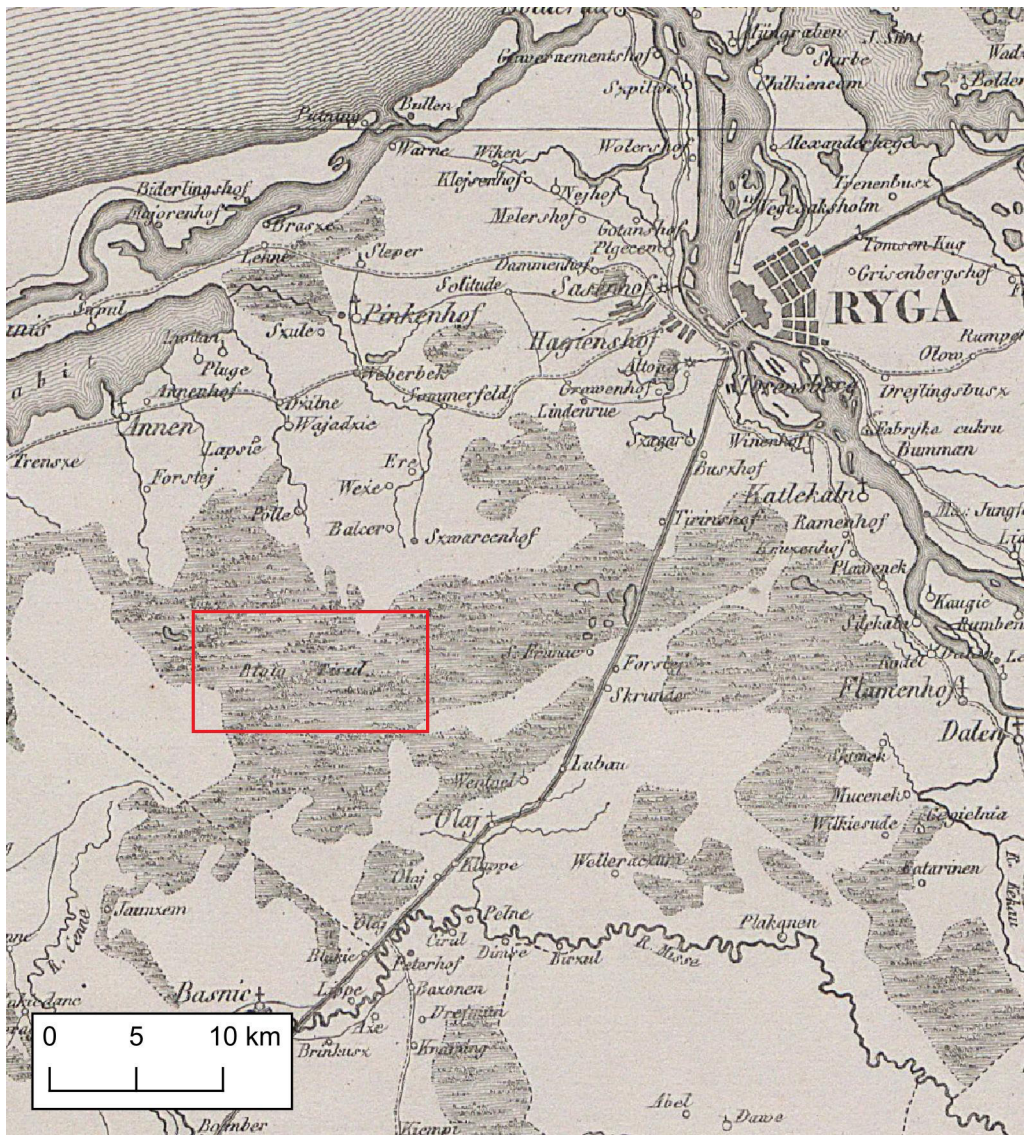


Figure 2. "Bloto Tirul" on *The Map of Old Poland*



Figure 3. "Czajcebloto" on *The Map of Old Poland*

Stokhid rivers is now part of the "Amazonian Polesya". Established in the early twentieth century, this national park serves as a sanctuary for birds and, during the spring meltdowns, the surrounding villages that remained can still become isolated from the outside world (Bryżko-Zapór, 2021, pp. 376–377).

Below, I juxtapose the overview of *The Map of Old Poland*'s wetlands as they appear in its

division into original map sheets and drawing on relevant commentary literature. This approach illustrates what is needed for further wet cartographical studies that bridge the analysis of map content with the restoration of wetlands' micro-geohistories. Some sheets, including the Polesyan wetlands, are discussed more extensively, while others are just enumerated. *Słownik geograficzny Królestwa Polskiego i in-*



Figure 4. “Kępa dobrzyńska” and “Kępa głowińska” on *The Map of Old Poland*

ných krajów słowiańskich [*The Geographical Dictionary of the Kingdom of Poland and Other Slavic Countries*, hereafter referred to as *Dictionary*] has served as my primary reference for verifying various geohistorical entries and hydronyms.

Sheet II [Ryga]. Contemporary Latvia contains an existing Cenāš tīrelis bog (Figure 2, “Bloto Tirul” on the map). As an active peat extraction

site and nature reserve, this bog is located around 30 km south-west of Riga. At the time the map was created, the area fell under the Russian Governorate. During the interwar period, parts of the bog were drained by Latvians to establish new farming settlements (Ziemeļniece & Vanaga, 2023, p. 47). Modern sources note further anthropogenic pressures resulting from Soviet-era migration, the peat industry, and the

Some map sheets depict vast expanses of wetlands that remain unnamed. On Sheet IV [Wielkie Łuki], for example, the Polisto and Tsevlo [Cewło] lakes are surrounded from the north by large swamps, now located in Russia. Sheet VII [Dinaburg] contains segments of Belarusian wetlands along the Disna River, as does Sheet VIII [Witebsk]. The wetlands in this region are situated near the Uswiat (Uświacz) River, as referenced in *Dictionary* (Krzywicki, 1890, p. 594). On Sheet IX [Smoleńsk], a significant, unnamed wetland area appears north of the River Mieža.

In Sheet XI [Gdańsk], the original name of a non-vanished bog, "Czajczębloto", appears in the Reda River's area (Figure 3). Two villages, "Ryby" and "Rybieńki", are noted for their historical connections to fishing activities. According to *Dictionary*, canals were constructed along this river to drain the flood-prone areas, and local weather patterns – particularly sea winds – contributed to the formation of extensive floodplains. The Reda River is also highlighted for its abundance of fish, especially salmon (Frydrychowicz, 1888, pp. 583–584).

Extensive swamp areas are depicted below Kowno and along several rivers in Sheet XIII [Wilno]. Zygmunt Gloger, in his riverway travelogue (1903), described some of these swamps which now belong to the biospheric reserves. The "Berezyński" Canal and lots of wetlands are indicated in Sheet XIV [Mińsk]; additional wetlands are also highlighted in Sheet XV [Mohilew] and Sheet XVI [Mścisław].

Sheet XVII [Międzyrzecz] presents parts of the Noteć and Obra Rivers' floodplains, indicating their new hydroinfrastructure such as canals. „Błotno”, „Bagniewo” or „Moczydła” signify wet toponyms and remain near the Noteć to this day. Similarly, along the Obra River and its network of canals, names such as „Błocko”, „Bagnisko”, „Podmokłe Małe” and „Podmokłe Wielkie” have survived, all echoing a muddy past when these rivers wound their way through broad swamps (Nałkowski, 1887, p. 645).

The Stara [old] Noteć River and its meadows are noted in *Dictionary*, including information that during flood seasons these wetlands could reach up to one meter in depth. Some areas were drained after 1772 to accommodate new Prussian settlers (Lub. et al., 1886, p. 188), yet they remain visible on the map, which tends to represent these zones as swampy floodplains

rather than true marshes. Other wetlands related to the Noteć River are discussed in *Dictionary* as obstacles to human movement. "Ujście" is mentioned as a historical signpost of such places where in the early modern past, or even earlier, people could cross if water levels allowed them to. Due to geological depression, both the Obra and the Noteć Rivers were eventually regulated, leading to a significant reduction of their once-rich wetlands. The Noteć River is also referred to as the "Polish Nile", with information explaining how its wetlands helped the early modern Kingdom repel northern invaders (Nałkowski, 1887, p. 645). This military function of early-modern waters is echoed in the discussion of other areas, such as the fluvial and muddy marshes of Polesya (Nałkowski, 1887, p. 643). Nevertheless, the prevailing narrative in *Dictionary* favours the modern view of reclaiming wetlands as a means of cultural advancement, improving both human habitation and movement.

On Sheet XVIII [Poznań], the floodplains marked alongside the Noteć River are likely not ecologically rich swamps, as these areas were drained and the river between Uść and Bydgoszcz is described as "navigable" (Majerski, 1880, p. 613). Thus, for historical geographers, *The Map of Old Poland* will probably present higher value in identifying wetlands in the eastern territories (formerly part of the Russian Empire), which, as we know, had not undergone significant environmental transformation during the period in which the map was created.

Interestingly, the map also depicts two river islands near Dobrzyń that no longer exist (Figure 4): "Kępa dobrzyńska" and "Kępa głowińska" on the Vistula River, as noted also by Gloger (1903, p. 147). These islands are believed to have disappeared due to the rising water levels and the mid-nineteenth century "catastrophic" floods caused by climate changes (Degórska, 2015, pp. 148–149). Another factor could be the morphological changes in the riverbed, linked to deforestation and afforestation activities in the Kujawy area.

Sheet XIX [Warszawa] stands out for its preserved wet and amusing toponyms, such as „zembrzuś mokry grunt". Historically, this was a swampy region, with visible wetlands stretching between the Mazovia and Podlasie districts. Expansive and biodiverse floodplains (in Polish: łęgi) were noted next to Ostrołęka

and along both the Narew and Bug Rivers.

On Sheet XX [Białystok], the “Bobrza” River – today called Biebrza – is marked on the map as running from Wizna to Goniądz through a wetland area known now as “Bagno Ławki”. These swamps are also mentioned by Gloger in the last section of his travelogue as “grząskie” (1903, p. 202), which means “mire”. On this map, Białystok is surrounded by the river and wetlands from the west. Further east, around Bereza Kartuzka, other notable wetlands are found near lakes, some of which have survived thanks to the creation of protected areas, such as the “Sporowski” nature reserve established in 1991.

Sheet XXI [Słuck] depicts the southern part of its original district (“powiat słucki”) as covered with wetlands and wet forests, forming an extension of the Pripyat marshes. This map mirrors the nature of wetlands attached to the rivers from both sides as in the case of rivers Słucz, Łań, Morocz or Cna and described in *Dictionary* (Krzywicki, 1899, p. 842). The local wet ecosystems are home to numerous animal species, including beavers and occasionally larger fauna like brown bears or deer. Peat bogs are also noted in the region (p. 842). The largest wetland in this area is “Bagno Hryczyn”, found between the Cna and Łań Rivers and referenced by name in Łotysz (2022, fig. 4). Here, *The Map of Old Poland* clearly demonstrates not only the prevalence of wetlands but also the abundance of wetland-related hydronyms, such as “Ubołocie” near the Biełoc River, “Zabołocie” above the town Nieświż, and “Podbołocie” at the Jasiolda River. The rivers Łosza and Niemań are flanked by vast wetlands, especially near Szack. The Ogiński Canal is also visible, constructed by private investors during the reign of Stanisław August Poniatowski, mostly because of the need to drain these wet territories (Łotysz, 2022, pp. 38–39). Additionally, the Lake Kniaz is surrounded by wetlands as well. According to *Dictionary*, this lake “does not link with any water system, only surrounded by huge swamps, probably part of a historical lake bed” (Jelski, 1883, p. 193).

A part of the historical “gubernia mińska” appears on Sheet XXII [Bobrujsk], where the map indicates wetlands situated along the Berezyna and Ptycz Rivers. Meanwhile, Sheet XXVII [Lublin] depicts wetlands in the vicinity of Dywin and the village of “Wytarta” above

Kamień Koszyrski (Figure 5). Notably, the name “Wytarta” derives from the Polish word for “wrenched” or “torn away,” referencing the village’s origins as land reclaimed from the surrounding bog, literally: ripped out from the bog (Bryżko-Zapór, 2021, p. 372). To this day, this countryside area remains characterised by wetlands, dotted with “glimmering ponds” and traversed by horse-drawn wagons – a living echo of its watery past (p. 372). This continuity of wetland environments with the historical landscape of Poland is captured in *The Map of Old Poland*.

One of the most significant environments of old wet Poland represents the wetlands of Polesya. Sheet XXVIII [Pińsk] depicts the Pina, Strumień, Jasiolda Rivers, along with the rivers “Zgniły Prypec” and the Styr below, set amidst their surrounding wetlands near the town of Pińsk. Among the most notable hydronyms preserved on *The Map of Old Poland* is “Woločowe Błoto”, situated between the Lwa and Swiga Rivers (below Dawid Grudek, Figure 6). This place is referenced by Łowmiański in the section on riparian toponyms, such as those connected to the Boh and Dnieper Rivers (1973, p. 104, fig. 330), and also in the memoirs by Kieniewicz (1989, p. 324). It is briefly described in *Dictionary* as a deserted area with no villages (Jelski, 1893, p. 881). “Woločowe Błoto” is located within the larger, unnamed region of “Bagno Olmańskie” on the map (Łotysz, 2022, fig. 4), demonstrating how Polesya was once covered by a mosaic of wetlands. Some, like “Woločowe Błoto,” were later distinguished as “uroczysko” – sites recognised for their added ecological value. The whole Olmańskie wetland, next to “Hryczyn”, was so huge that it retained strategic military significance until the era of the Second Polish Republic, when it became apparent that even wetlands were susceptible to drying out (Łotysz, 2022, pp. 326–327). Another factor that excluded this and other wetlands from military strategies was the advancement of technology and the development of tanks. Today, however, the challenges on the eastern border of contemporary Poland – such as the war in Ukraine and the movement of non-European migrants across the Polish-Belarusian border – demonstrate how ecological and military concerns are once again intertwined. Healthy, wet, and muddy wetlands regain value as natural barriers, presenting

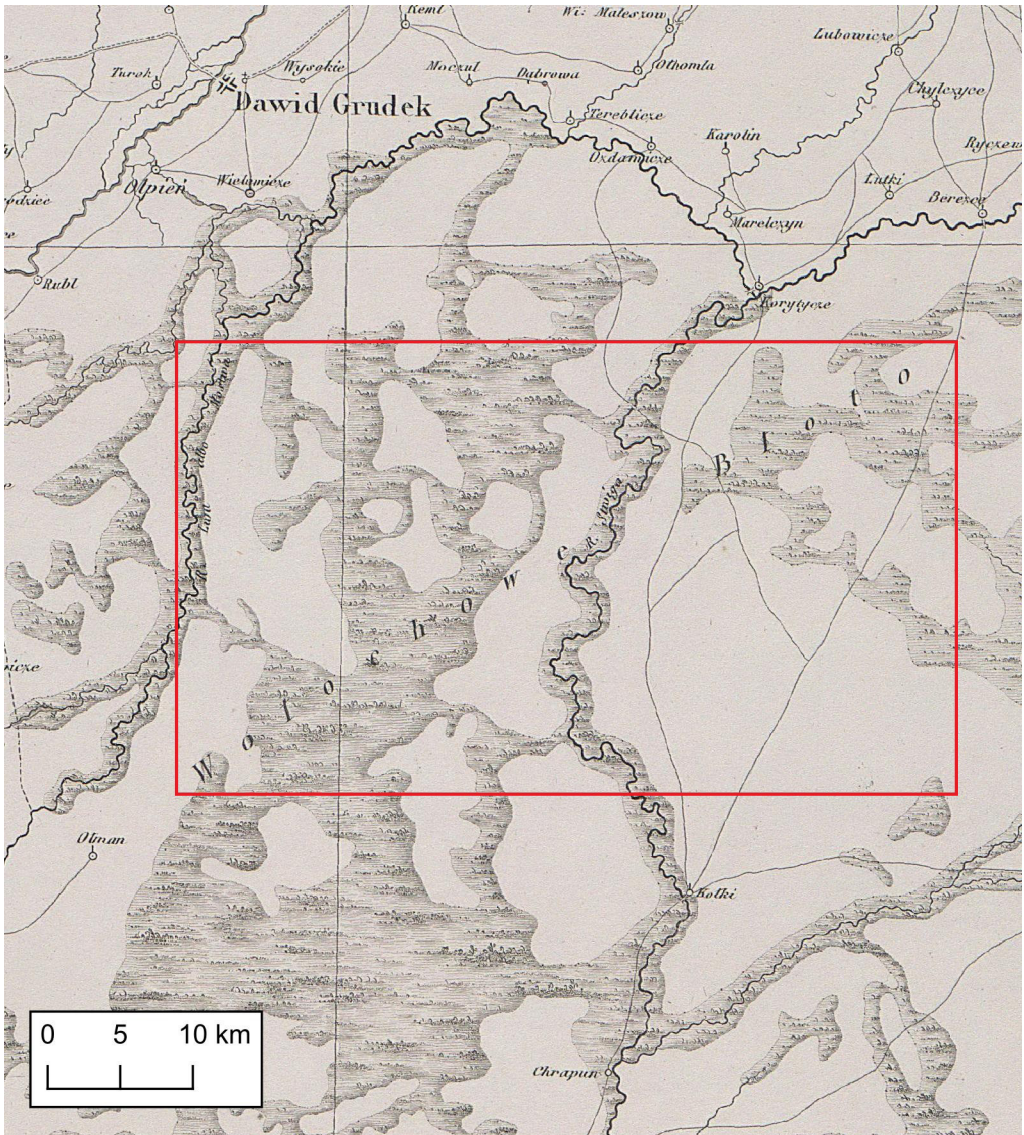


Figure 6. "Wolochowe Błoto" on *The Map of Old Poland*

no-go zones for tanks and other heavy military equipment (Dmitruczuk, 2025).

In his famous travelogue from the period when the map was created, written in 1840, Ignacy Józef Kraszewski observes that, in the context of massive river floods, the River Styr played a role for its region akin to that of the Nile for Egypt (1840/1985, p. 35). He describes Polesya, especially near Stepanhorod, as a land-

scape of "sand, mud, and pines everywhere" (p. 41). Kraszewski recounts his journey to the village called "Serniki" on the Stubla River (a tributary of the Styr), traversing the historic "Pińskie błota" (Pripyat marshes), which dry out by summer but, as he emphasizes, in spring time are so inundated that they carry barges (p. 59). He repeatedly remarks on the unappealing nature of this landscape, insisting that

such uninviting, non-scenic, and non-touristic places are valuable for their very monotony and “sadness”, which he equates with boredom rather than sentimental or romantic melancholy (p. 89). Certain villages situated along the Pripyat River, such as “Dzikowicze” (Figure 7), are set within areas characterised by “inaccessible swamps” (p. 66). The castle at Czarto-

rsk on the Styr River represents a landscape of “green floodplains”, its access defended and fortified by meadows that are often flooded (p. 69). When discussing the forests of Polesya, Kraszewski notes that, due to the omnipresent swamps, hunting with greyhounds is impossible – which, paradoxically, results in an abundance of game, including bears, elk, and lynx (p. 76).

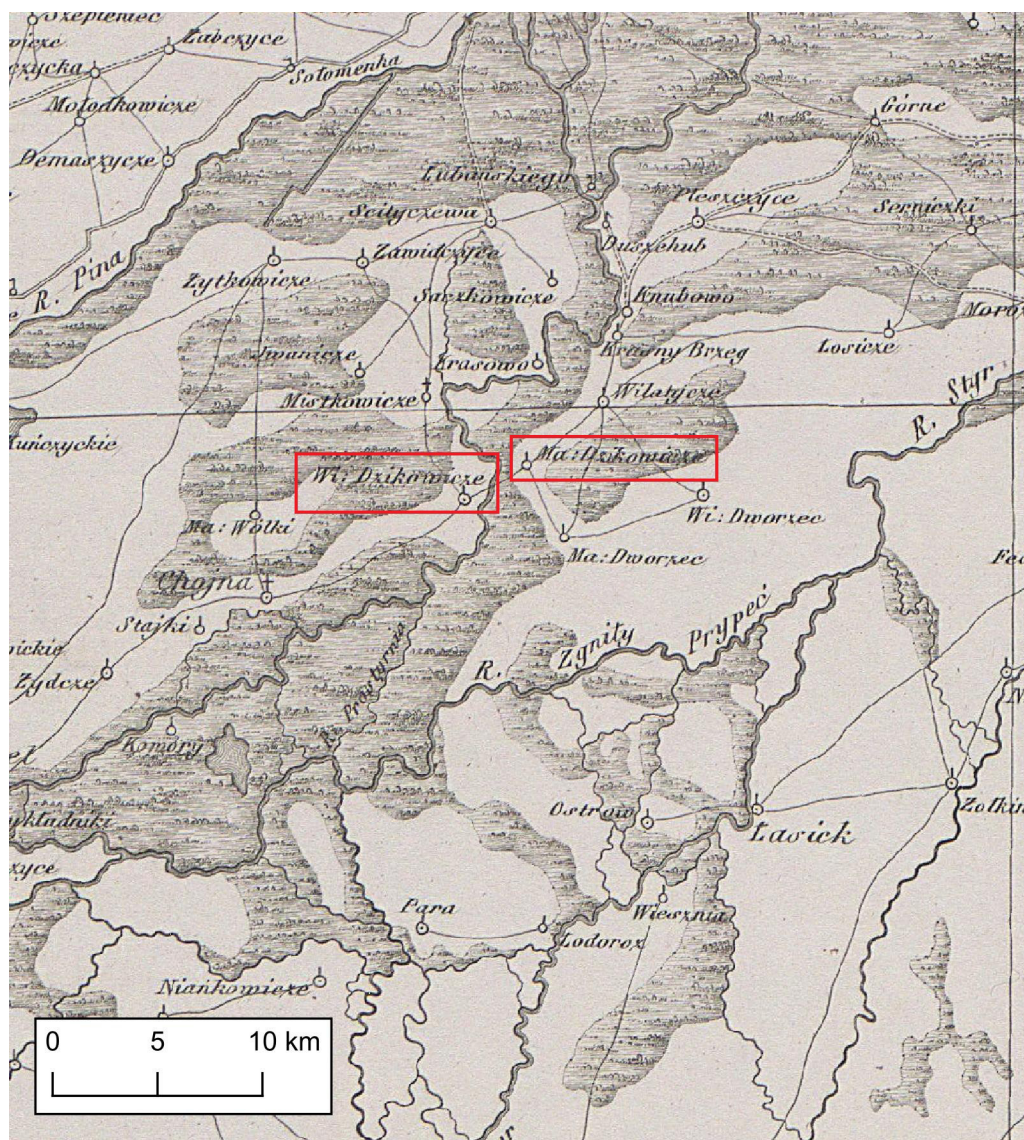


Figure 7. “Dzikowicze” villages on *The Map of Old Poland*

He adds that, since ancient times, the swamps and primeval forests of Polesya have historically provided resistance in times of conflict (p. 106). It can be also supported by local recounts that one swamp ("Moroczno") never freezes because it is insulated by a layer of heat-retaining peat (Łotysz, 2022, p. 483 footnote 137). On *The Map of Old Poland*, this vast region is left as an empty, uncharted expanse.

Kraszewski, writing in the Polish colonial style of the higher elites, retells stories on the origins of "błota poleskie" ("Polesya swamps"). One tale recounts that the Black Sea once spread as far as the Pina and Jasiółda Rivers, reaching up to Pińsk, until a Kievan ruler "clove the mountains asunder, loosed the pent-up waters, and nothing remained but marshes" [*rozciął góry, spuścił zatrzymane wody, i zostały się tylko błota*] (Kraszewski, 1840/1985, p. 107). The "emptiest" region is known as "Zarzeczce", crisscrossed by numerous rivers and rivulets, home to turtles, loaches or weatherfish, and crayfish (p. 115). Despite its remoteness, it is believed that "time – that mighty artificer of marvels – shall, in due course, bestow enlightenment here also" [*czas, ten wielki twórca cudów, i tu powoli wniesie oświatę*] (p. 116). In winter, the wasteland (in Polish: *pustkowie*) of Zarzeczce is covered in a monochromatic whiteness, "like the inside of an egg" [*w jednostajnej białości, jak w jajku*] (p. 123). This uncivilised Polesya is also rich with folk legends, such as the one about the snake that must not be killed, even if found in one's own cottage (pp. 146–147).

Both culturally and ecologically rich, the wetland ecosystem of Polesya is also described in *Dictionary*, where rare animal and plant species are listed. However, this biocentric perspective is quickly contrasted with more modern commentary highlighting the region's underdeveloped agriculture (Nałkowski, 1887, p. 642).

Sheet XXIX [Owruć] includes the region of Chornobyl, the lower Pripyat River, and its surrounding wetlands. Another valuable feature is the Dnieper River's swamps with the attached "Błoto Oparzyste", along with the smaller but preserved under the historical name – "Błoto Zamglaj" (Figure 8). As *Dictionary* informs, the wetlands in this historical district were mostly impassable, which created problems for travellers during the spring and autumn seasons (Krzywicki, 1886, p. 780). The Volhynian parts of

Polesya were likewise swampy (Bryżko-Zapór, 2021, pp. 24–25), and these wetlands carried their own mythology, separate from that of Pińsk, including tales of an ancient sea where whales once lived (p. 30).

On the Dniester river fork, Sheet XXXIII [Lwow] features an unnamed wetland area between Komarno and Sambor. Near the border of Galicia, close to Beresteczko, a famous battle took place between the Polish Crown and Chmielnicki's Cossack army. Wetlands in this region (along the Styr River) played a significant role in the Cossacks' great defeat. When the Cossacks were surrounded by Polish troops, they attempted a night escape through the marshes, but panic broke out and over eight thousand people drowned (Bryżko-Zapór, 2021, pp. 326–328).

Finally, the last wetland preserved under its original historical name is "Błoto Irdyń" [Sheet XXXVI. Czerkasy] near a city Cherkasy (now in Ukraine), which was often flooded by the Dnieper and the entire area was described as muddy (Rulikowski, 1880, p. 802). Additionally, "Błoto Irdyń" appears on another map of the Dnieper River basin [Sheet XL. Czehryn].

When re-storying the various types of wetlands preserved on *The Map of Old Poland*, it becomes clear that these landscapes differed across the historical Polish territories. Some wetlands resembled the forested swamps typical of central and western Europe, which were characteristic more for such areas as the Niemen region (Gloger, 1903, p. 24 and following). Others, such as the boggy moorlands with their Polesyan "hało" peat marshes (Łotysz, 2022, p. 29), presented a distinct character. The cultural approach of aquacriticism enables to see them today not in geographical or historical isolation but as interconnected sites of heritage, represented both visually, as patches on the map, and linguistically, through their toponyms. We can now also study wetlands in comparative perspectives and recognise similar processes between the colonial histories and the environmental heritage of Polesya and other marshy regions. For example, the endangered wetlands of Ireland, shaped by its colonial past under Britain, can be examined through the distinctive Irish wet term "Gaeltacht", which highlights the cultural significance of these landscapes (Cronin, 2019, p. 13).

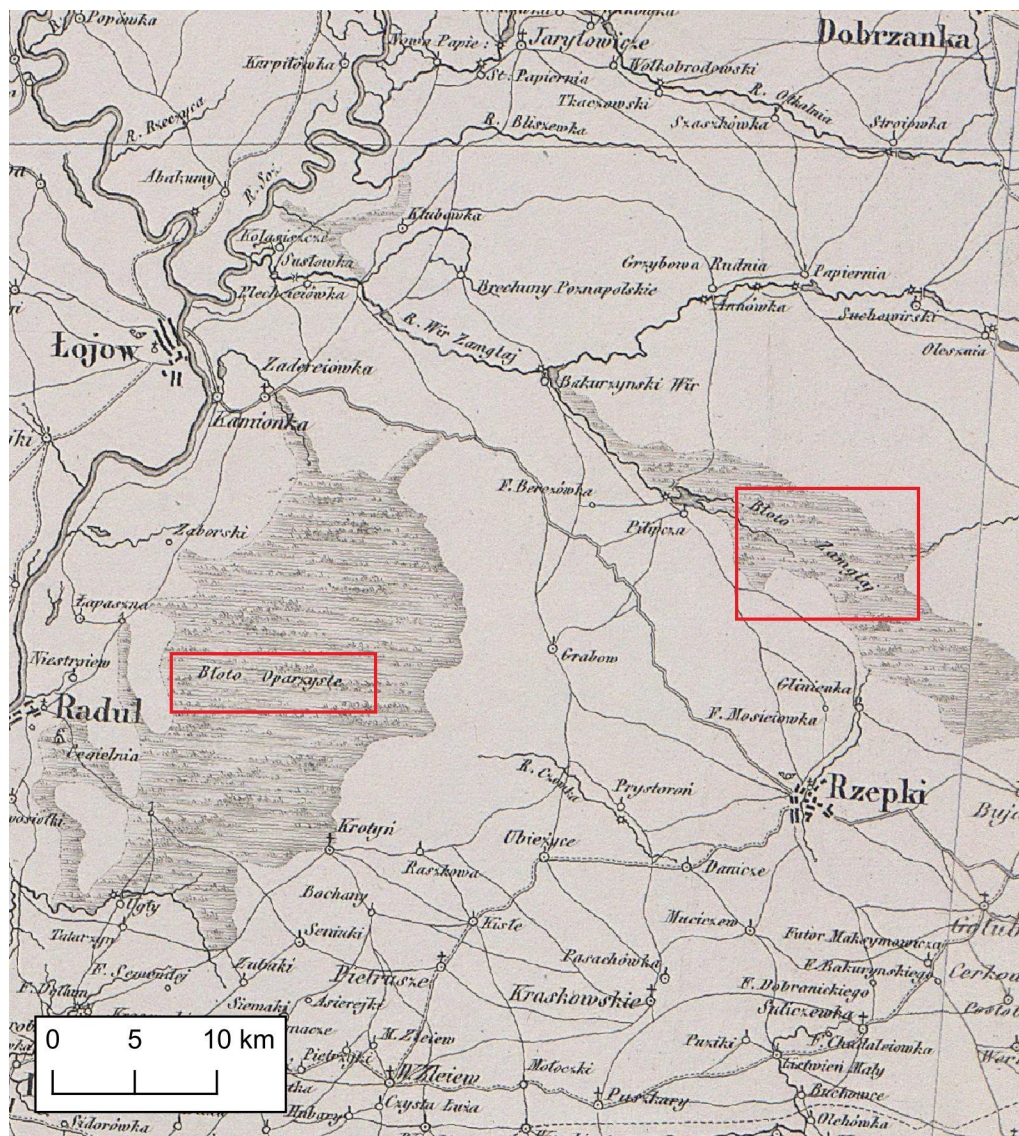


Figure 8. "Błoto Oparzyste" and "Zamglaj" on *The Map of Old Poland*

4. Conclusion or how to continue studying cartographical wetlands

Ludwik Plater, an active member of the Paris émigré community, adopted a scientific approach to the mapping of old Poland (Chałubińska, 1986, p. 447). In his *Opisanie jeograficzno-histeryczno-statystyczne województwa poznańskiego*

(Plater, 1841), he explains in the introduction what "old Poland" signifies (pp. V–VI): it is a historical entity, defined by the borders that existed prior to 1772, encompassing all its environments, including wetlands. In this article, I have drawn upon the historical background of *The Map of Old Poland's* and the problematic status of its political borders in the context of remaining waters to reconsider the military

and nationalistic processes of possessing wetlands. Instead, I look for an alternative approach – one focused on ecological and cartographical restoration. The aim expressed here is the further development of blue environmental history, where also wetlands are viewed as precious landscapes that can be restored and their stories retold.

However, alongside the patches of wetlands indicated on *The Map of Old Poland* – originally marked for military purposes – an even greater territory is revealed by the script and toponyms that signal a deeper kingdom within old Polish lands: the realm of waters and marshes. Even in my childhood neighbourhood, on Hafciarska Street in Międzyziesie at the outskirts of Warsaw, as new residential developments increasingly pave over the land with concrete, I recall that old street names, such as “Kaczy Dół”, preserve the memory of a swampy past that *The Map of Old Poland* once recorded.

Re-storying *The Map of Old Poland*'s wetlands means more than simply recalling lost historical landscapes. It offers a way to reimag-

ine the past in the future, and to re-store the movement of water in Poland and beyond, across local and more than local borders and at multiple scales. If this map once captured the emigrants' aspirations for a future “Great Poland” within historical boundaries, it already contained elements of fiction and possibility to represent the future. Preserving such sources in diverse digital formats will inspire more curatorial and counter-mapping initiatives, and, I believe, bring more critical reflection on the remaining wet ecosystems.

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