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Major Orthodox Pilgrimage Destinations in the Past and Present Poland

The beginnings of the Eastern Orthodox Church in Poland date back to the first half of the 14th century. Alongside its organisation structures the Church brought a tradition of pilgrimages to sacred sites, typically very strong in this denomination. Initially, the destinations of the Orthodox Poles included the main Orthodox centres outside the Polish Kingdom, such as the Holy Land, the Athos, the Sinai, etc. Local sites developed gradually and were mostly famous for the appearances of the Mother of God or related to the cult of the local saints. Pilgrims were also drawn to certain monastic centres renowned for religious devotion. The object, however, that attracted most reverence among the faithful were icons of the Mother of God, Jesus, angels and saints.

This paper reviews all major pilgrimage destinations in the Polish tradition of the Orthodox Church. While the authors have limited their list to the sites currently located on the Polish territory, it should be borne in mind that in the past there used to be other important Orthodox pilgrimage destinations such as Poczajów or Żyrowice. For the purpose of clarity, the sites are presented in the alphabetical order.

Góra Jawor

A mountain (720 m) at the Polish-Slovak border south of the Wysowa village in the western part of the Beskid Niski range. The two services celebrated at the site (on 12 July and 14 October) draw Greek Catholic and Eastern Orthodox faithful from all over Poland. In 1925, the Mother of God is said to have appeared before a poor widow making an illegal border crossing. In an attempt to provide food for her children the woman was trying to get through to her relatives in Cegiel'ka village. According to the local tradition, the Mother of God appeared in the beech-tree on a slope of Góra (mount) Jawor and told the widow to go back home promising that her children would be fed. Soon after the woman's return, a cousin paid an unlikely visit bringing the necessary food. The site of the revelation quickly began to attract the local faithful or both the Greek Catholic and Eastern Orthodox denominations.

In 1929, a chapel was built and consecrated by the Greek Catholic bishop of Przemyśl, Jozafat Kocyłowski.

Grabarka

An Orthodox sanctuary near the town of Siemiatycze in eastern Poland; the foremost Orthodox pilgrimage centre in Poland known as the “Orthodox Częstochowa” and “the hill of a thousand crosses”. The convent of St Martha and the Mother of God was founded in 1947. The site is known for miraculous healings performed with the water from a source at the foot of the mountain.

According to a legend, the special nature of Grabarka is based on the cult of the miraculous icon of *Spas Izbawnik* of Mielnik known and worshiped as early as in the mid 13th century. Threatened by a Tartar invasion, the monks of Mielnik took the icon deep into the Puszcza Mielnicka (Mielnik Forest) and hid it at the Grabarka hill. Its later history is not known. Another legend is directly related to the evolution of the site into a cult centre and tells about dramatic events that took place at the beginning of the 18th century. In the summer of 1710, the nearby town of Siemiatycze was struck by an outbreak of cholera. The death toll was so great, that corpses could not be buried in time. Then, one of the faithful had a dream that to protect oneself from the disease, one had to take a large cross and make a pilgrimage to the Grabarka hill. The local vicar proclaimed the dream a revelation and led the townsfolk the hill. Those who reached the destination and drank from the stream running at the foot of the hill apparently saved themselves from the plague, as there were no more fatal victims of cholera among them. The news of the miraculous healing spread quickly in the area and pilgrims soon followed.

In gratitude for the miraculous end of the epidemic a chapel was built, later to be replaced by an Orthodox church. Still in the 18th c., the place established itself as a cult centre with the faithful turning out in particularly great numbers for the day of Transfiguration (18 August or, according to the Julian calendar, 6 August). In 1990, sadly, this historic 18th c. church of the Transfiguration (Spas), was burned down. The design of the new church recently built on the spot draws on the old building. The monastery compound also includes the church under the invocation of the Mother of God Consoling, a monastery house with the St. Barbara’s chapel, a pilgrim’s house and two morgues.

The old tradition of foot pilgrimages to Grabarka was revived in 1986. Since then, the faithful have brought crosses of penance and of thanksgiving and left them at the hill. Upon the arrival to the sanctuary, the pilgrims first make their way to the sacred source at the foot of the hill and use a special linen cloth to wash their sick spots. After the ritual cleansing and drinking of the miraculous water the pilgrims, many on their knees, carry the crosses to the top of the hill. One of the traditions, now well established, is to circle the church three times on the knees. The crosses are always planted in the presence of a priest; after a short prayer the priest blesses

the pilgrim and the cross. Before major celebrations the crosses are often dressed with colourful ribbons, robes and flowers.

The all-night celebration begins with an evening service (*wieczernia*). At night, a solemn service for the dead is celebrated (*panichida*). The faithful burn candles during a nightlong vigil of prayer. The celebrations end with a solemn liturgy celebrated by the metropolite and bishops, during which fruits are blessed. Owing to the small size of the church, all services are held outside.

Jableczna

An Orthodox monastery of St. Onofrio the Great located on the river Bug, some two kilometres east of the village of Jableczna. It houses two worshiped miraculous icons of St Onofrio and the Theotokos.

The monastery dates back to 1498, the date found on the oldest Book of Gospels (*Ewangeliarz Liturgiczny*) in the abbey. Its foundation is ascribed to the family of Zabereziński. Until the 17th century, the abbey played the role of the local parish church, but it was known well enough to pull burghers from the nearby city of Brześć in a pilgrimage on the patron saint's day (25 June or, according to the Julian calendar, 12 June), as early as in 1527.

A legend links the beginning of the abbey with the appearance of St Onofrio before fishermen on the banks of the river Bug near the village of Jableczna. The saint foretold the fame of the future monastery in the words: "On this site shall my name be praised". No sooner than he uttered the words, the legend says, the river brought the saint's icon out of nowhere. The men set it up on an oak tree at the site of the revelation and some of them stayed behind as guards in order not to leave the image unattended. When a St Onofrio's chapel and monastery were built the guards of the icon joined it as the first monks.

The monastery strongly rejected the Accord of Brest-Litowsk [the creation of the Greek Catholic Church] and managed to stand its ground thanks to the patronage of the local landowners. During that difficult period in the history of the Orthodox Church, the local populace defied the official ban and carried on with the pilgrimages. After 1795 [the final partition of Poland], Jableczna went under the sovereignty of the Habsburg Empire and was subordinated to the bishop of Bukowina. In 1809, the southern part of the Podlasie region was included in the newly established Duchy of Warsaw and after 1815 in its successor, the Kingdom of Poland. The political changes were accompanied by changes in the diocesan subordination. In 1815, the monastery went under the jurisdiction of the bishops of Mińsk and in 1835 to the archbishop of Warsaw. It was during the latter period (specifically in 1837-1840), when the currently extant monastery buildings were erected including the Orthodox church of St Onofrio, the belfry and the monks' cells.



Fig. 1.
Major Orthodox pilgrimage places in Poland

At the beginning of the 20th century, the abbey church was extended and the chapel of the Dormition of the Mother of God was erected. In 1909, the *skit* (hermitage) of Saints Sergius and Herman of Valaam was built on an island on the Białe lake followed, three years later, by the chapel of the Synaxis of Our Lord on the site of St Onofrio's appearance. That was when the monastery was at the peak of its development and counted 80 monks. This did not last long and after the outbreak of the First World War, at the news of the approaching German army the monks fled deep into Russia taking with them the miraculous icons of St Onofrio and the Mother of God.

The monastic life in Jableczna was revived after 1919, when some of the monks returned from Russia. However, the period between the World Wars was very difficult for the monastery. A campaign, backed by the Polish government, to liquidate Orthodox churches in the Chełm region included an attempt at the monastery. In 1924, at an express demand of the authorities the number of friars was limited to just four. During the Second World War, most of the buildings perished in fire, including the living quarters, the library and archives. The monastery was further weakened after the War, when the Orthodox population was driven either into the Soviet Union or into the Polish Regained Lands in the west and north of the country, and as part of the nationalisation of monastic property, which, at one stage, included a decision to close the monastery altogether. Against the odds, the order survived and remained the sole Orthodox monastery in Poland for decades. During 1974-1992, it housed the Higher Orthodox Theological Seminary. Father Sawa (Hrycuniak), the archimandrite of the monastery during the 1970s, is now the metropolitan of Warsaw and Poland.

The latest upturn in the monastery fortunes started with the return of the miraculous icons, which, taken by the monks fleeing from the approaching German army in 1915 to Russia, remained outside Poland until 1953. When in 1990 the icons were stolen (to be found four years later), a copy of the miraculous icon of the Mother of God of Turkowice was placed in the monastery church.

Each year on St Onofrio's day (25 June or, according to the Julian calendar, on 12 June), thousands of faithful, as well as the Polish Orthodox hierarchy gather together at the church. Many of the faithful come in pilgrimage, carrying the customary crosses and icons. The festive service begins in the evening on the eve of the saint's day, on 24th June, with a nightlong vigil and liturgy and a solemn procession. The pilgrims visit all year round, but tend to turn out in numbers on the Holy Spirit Day (Monday of the 8th week after Easter), on the day of Dormition of the Theotokos (28 August) and on the day of the icon of the Mother of God of Turkowice (first Sunday after the 15 August).

Piatieńka

An Orthodox sanctuary near the village of Folwarki Tylwickie, some 30 km from the city of Białystok in Northeastern Poland.

According to the tradition, during an epidemic (1708-1710), children shepherds saw a Madonna who told them that a chapel should be erected on the site of the revelation and the epidemic would stop. A healing source sprang nearby. According to another account, dated to the late 19th century, a girl suffering from the disease had a vision whereby the epidemic would stop after people would cleanse a dirty place, which was interpreted as an instruction to cleanse the source used by pigs as a mud-pit. Once this was done people stopped falling ill.

A *Praskewa Piatnica* church was erected next to the source and gave the name to the sanctuary. Out of gratefulness for the salvation, the local population soon

founded the church of Saints Borys and Gleb at the nearby Kniaziowa Góra (consecrated in 1744). In 1819, work started to on a new church under the invocation of the Raising of the Holy Cross on the site of the former churches: early 18th century church of Saints Borys and Gleb and the Praskewa Piatnica chapel near the source. The chapel has an octagonal plan and is capped with a conical roof and an onion-like helm. The church of Saints Borys and Gleb housed the miraculous icon of Our Lady “Skorbiaszcza” of unknown origin, painted on a wooden board with an oval-shaped top edge. The icon was covered with an old-gold apron. Beginning in mid 19th century, the importance of the sanctuary gradually began to dwindle. Another miracle, however, turned its fortunes around. In 1929, the Crucifixion icon was miraculously renovated. The old and worn out icon brought from Russia by the local teacher was taken into a barn where it was normally stored and soon it looked as new with frames glistening as if newly gilded. Carried in a procession into the cemetery church at Piateńka it was an object of cult in the regions of Podlasie, Grodzieńszczyzna and Wołyń. In 1972, the miraculous icon was stolen in a burglary and has never been recovered. The theft undermined the role of the sanctuary yet again. In memory of the former miracle at Piateńka a special annual service is held on the tenth Friday after Easter.

Puchły

An Orthodox sanctuary in the region of Podlasie with the cult of the miraculous icon of the Mother of God of Protection.

The icon probably dates back to the end of 16th century. According to a tradition, the Mother of God healed on the site a person suffering from grave swelling and left to him her image in the treetop of a nearby linden tree. Another account has it that the Orthodox population were subject to forcible conversion into Catholicism by the local Catholic landowner. Still, they would gather in a tiny wooden church built for their needs where, to strengthen their Orthodox confession, the Mother of God appeared to them in the form of an icon found in one of the trees surrounding the church – a linden-tree. The miraculous nature of the icon was confirmed on numerous occasions. The Church of the Mother of God of Protection (*Pokrova Presviatoj Bogorodicy*), which houses the icon, was erected in 1798 and is the third church on the site. The building was expanded three times; first in 1862, when a new Altar of St Gregory of Cesarea was added, than in 1864 and finally in 1870, when a new gilded iconostas was furnished. According to another story, the tree on which the icon had appeared had still existed as recently as in the beginning of the 20th century. The local population indicated a tree growing in the church courtyard (an aspen). Currently, the miraculous image is exhibited in a gilded *kiyot* [case] on the left hand side of the church in front of the iconostas. Another Orthodox temple in Puchły, which existed between 1870 and 1919, was a cemetery church.

Stary Kornin

Between 18th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, this was one of the main pilgrimage centres of the Orthodox Church in Poland, known for its cult of the miraculous icon of the Mother of God and located south west of the town of Hajnówka.

The sanctuary dates back to 1704 when an icon made an appearance at the site. Shepherds found an image emanating an unusual glow in a poplar tree growing next to a source and soon an Orthodox church was built there. In accordance to another tradition, the icon came from a church burned down in 1704 in Duby. One day, the icon showed its powers when an old beggar, working for the church carrying the icon from door to door asking for donations for the construction of a new church, lied drunk at the side of the road. The icon revealed itself in full glow to a passing vicar of Kornin. The priest took the image to his church. Soon miracles followed. Information of hundreds of healed (mainly blind and lame) remained until today. Donations from the faithful were used to build another Orthodox church, solemnly consecrated in 1783. Catholics too, were drawn to this icon after the revelation, which is confirmed by the numerous donations to the sanctuary. The icon's evacuation to Russia in 1915 and then its disappearing undermined the pilgrimage tradition. The sanctuary was also famous for its healing water. The masonry-reinforced source had served the faithful until very recently, but a drainage scheme in the area made the source run dry leaving just a rock to commemorate the place.

Supraśl

An Orthodox monastery of Annunciation in the town of Supraśl, some 15 km northwest of the city of Białystok.

Founded at beginning of the 16th century at Gródek by the voivod Aleksander Chodkiewicz, the monastery soon moved to a more peaceful place. According to a tradition, the search for the right site started with several days of prayer and then a wooden cross with sacred relics was floated down the river Supraśl with the intention to erect the monastery wherever it runs aground. The river tossed the cross out at an ancient sacred spot called Suchy Hrud where, according to accounts, a pagan cult site used to be. The construction work was supported by the bishop of Smoleńsk, Józef Sołtan (later to become the Kiev metropolitan). In 1505, the monastery was confirmed in a special document (tomos) by the patriarch of Constantinople Joachim and by the Polish King Aleksander Jagiellończyk. The first wooden church of St John the Evangelist was built in 1501 with a refectory next to it. In 1510, a ceremonial consecration was held for the new church of Annunciation. Within just a few years the monk community grew to 40. In mid 16th century, the church of Resurrection was added above the catacombs housing the ashes of the friars, as well as a masonry refectory and a large building housing the monk's cells.

For 20 years, the Supraśl monastery resisted the union [of Brześć, establishing the Greek Catholic Church], but was eventually transferred to the Greek Catholic Basilian monks. The Basilians equipped the main church with an ornate Baroque iconostas made in Gdańsk in 1664, four side altars and wooden panelling up to the window level. At the beginning of the 19th century, the monastery returned to the Eastern Orthodox Church, but it remained a virtual ruin until a wholesale rebuilding operation at the end of the century. In 1924, it was handed over to the Catholic Church, a fact much protested by the local population, but confirmed by a decision of the court in Białystok (1938). In 1939, the Red Army stationed one of its maintenance units there, thus beginning its road to destruction. A foundry was located in the Annunciation church and the historic iconostas, wooden altars, panelling and icons were torched in the process. A valuable monastery library also perished. In 1944, the Annunciation church was blown-up by the German army and the remaining buildings set on fire. After the war, the Orthodox Church embarked on regaining the ruined property and decades later it received the church of St John the Evangelist, ruins of the Annunciation church and one of the monastery buildings.

The process of taking over of the monastery by the Orthodox Church led to a conflict with the Catholic Church. Finally, the buildings were returned to the already revived Orthodox order by a decision of the Chamber of the Council of Ministers in 1996.

In 1984, work started on the rebuilding of the Annunciation church, which is to look exactly as the one destroyed in 1944. Just as the original fortress-like building, the new church will have a tower at each corner with brattices and shooting slots. The three-aisled church had several types of vaulting: stellar, cross, barrel and crystal, and a central dome atop a tall drum. A three-sided apse closed the choir. The whole of the church was adorned by frescos painted on wet plaster. This technique makes colours last even in the harshest of climates. The frescos depicted scenes from the life of Christ, the Mother of God and saints. They were painted by an unknown Serb artist in mid 16th c. Parts of the lower frescos are permanently exhibited in the 17th c. palace of the archimandrites (division of the Państwowe Muzeum in Białystok).

The revival of the monastic life in Supraśl was accompanied by a revival of foot pilgrimages to the miraculous icon of the Mother of God of Supraśl whose days are celebrated on 9-10 August. The icon, a faithful copy of the icon of the Mother of God of Smoleńsk, was donated to the monastery by bishop Józef Sołtan in 1503. Soon after setting it on the left-hand side of the iconostas, the icon became famous for its grace. Evacuated from Supraśl in 1915, it never returned. Nowadays, the monastery has two copies, one in the church of St John the Evangelist. Official foot pilgrimages started in 1991. Another day often frequented by the pilgrims and faithful, besides the Mother of God's day, is St John's day (21 May) with the all-night vigil on the eve of the day and a solemn liturgy at the end. Every Wednesday at 18:00 a prayer known by the name of *Akatyst* is sang before the icon.

Turkowice

A former Orthodox sanctuary near Tomaszów Lubelski dating back to 14th c. the miraculous icon is ascribed to St Luke. There are a number of accounts on how the icon revealed itself. One of them tells about a Polish royal prince Władysław Opolczyk who took the icon of the Mother of God of Częstochowa from the town of Bełz. The prince is said to have taken with him also a number of copies and when his carriage bogged down in mud near Turkowice he had one of the copies used to get the vehicle out. Left behind in the mud, the icon revealed itself later in a miraculous manner. Another account says that the prince stopped there for baiting and when he set off again the horses could not pull the carriage with the icon. A beaming light was seen and one of the entourage horses kneeled in reverence; its rider, the tradition claims, came from the line of Daniel. On the next day after the prince's departure, the site where the cart stood was overgrown with camomile. Right on the spot marked by the camomile and the light a sanctuary was erected; light accompanied the work all the time and when the church was completed it stopped and an image of the Mother of God appeared in a miraculous way. From the very beginning, the sanctuary was known for numerous miracles and healings, partly performed thanks to the water from a holy source next to the temple. The main festive days at Turkowice were the Robe of the Theotokos at Blacherny (2 July) and the day of the Mother of God of Protection (1 October).

In 17th c., a monastery was located next to the church to be closed in 1789 by the Greek Catholic bishop, Maksymilian Rylko. In 1902 the place was handed over to nuns from the convent in Leśna Podlaska. During the next four years, not just a new convent was established but also an Orthodox church of Saints Sergiusz and Herman, as well as a large church topped by five domes and furnished with a richly adorned iconostas. During the same year, the miraculous icon was relocated to the new church, framed and adorned with an *omophorion*. Before the Great War, some 80 nuns lived in the convent, but they were evacuated just before the outbreak to Moscow. The nuns took the image with them. The last information on the whereabouts of the icon came from 1914 when it was at Kodeń, while a copy was left at Turkowice. After the war, the convent was taken over by the state, which handed it to the Catholic Convent of Servants to the Holy Mother of God in 1921.

In 1929, the oldest of the Turkowice churches was dismantled. The Orthodox then moved the copy of the miraculous icon to their sole extant temple in the cemetery. Between the wars, the frequent events of vandalism were particularly painful at the site of the original appearance of the icon where a small pine tree grew and source sprang. In 1937, exactly on the celebrated day of 2 July, the Orthodox church in the cemetery was dismantled and the source filled with waste. In 1940, Germans ordered the convent church to be returned to the Orthodox. After the Second World War, the convent was again taken over by the state and the Servant nuns forced to leave. Wide relocations of the Orthodox population caused the former role of the sanctuary to be forgotten.

In 1981, two icons, of Jesus Christ and the Mother of God, were discovered in the run-down chapel. The image of the Mother of God turned out to be the copy of the original Turkowice icon left in the convent in 1914. The renovated icon was given to the Orthodox church of St Nicolas in Tomaszów Lubelski.

Ujkowice

An Orthodox monastery of Saints Cyril and Methodius near Przemyśl.

The Ujkowice monastery was founded in 1985 originally as a Greek Catholic monastery by fathers Nikodem Makara and Atanazy Dąbrowski.

As a result of conflicts and protests in the village the monks were transferred to the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church in 1994. One year later, the ihumen Nikodem was promoted to the title of archimandrite and father Atanazy became the ihumen. The monks themselves erected a church within the monastery grounds surrounded by a high wall. The monastery is quite popular among young visitors of the Orthodox, Greek Catholic and Roman Catholic denomination.

Wojnowo

A monastery of the Priestless (Bezpopovtsy) Old Believers belonging to the community founded by Filipp (Filippovtsy), and an Orthodox convent in the Mazury lake district.

The roots of the Old Believers' monastery in the area are being sometimes linked to the mentions of the so-called Skit Iwanowski (Ivanovsk hermitage). In 1831, 24 Old Believer nuns are said to have set themselves on fire after having been raped by Prussian soldiers. The current compound was built at the site of the former dwelling of the hermit Grigorjew (1762–1851), a preceptor of the *molenna* (prayer house) in Wojnowo, known for his sternness in the matters of religion. Prior to 1848, the dwelling was converted into a small monastery of the Salvator and the Holy Trinity (*Spas-Troickij Monaster*), with Michaił Chawronin as the first ihumen. In 1848, acting on the plans to move to Wojnowo the Moscow-based centre of the Priestless Old Believers diakon Paweł Pruski (Piotr I. Ledniew, 1821–1895), together with two elders Antoni and Prokopiusz, arrived at the site and spurned efforts to reorganise the monastery. The period when Paweł Pruski held the function of the ihumen (1852–1867) was one of great development. The monastery expanded and received numerous valuable icons and volumes. A convent was established in the nearby Spychów (in Prussia known as Pupy). In 1867, Paweł was sidelined as a result of conflicts and the monastery was entrusted to the authority of monks Szymon and Bartłomiej and started to gradually decline. In the 1880, the last of the local monks, Makariusz, took his holy orders and left for Moscow taking with him the valuable books and icons, confiscated at the border.

A new chapter in the history of the monastery started in 1885, when it was purchased by the nun Eupraksja (Helena P. Dikoposka, 1863–1943), who arrived in Wojnowo from Moscow. She gathered around her the nuns from the Sychów convent, burned down ca. 1867, and from the convent of Osiniak. At the end of the 19th c., eight nuns lived in Wojnowo with the number growing to nearly 40 before the Great War. In 1901, one of the nuns is said to have dreamt about an unknown saint, who died in the former monastery in Onufryjewo and wanted to have his relics found. The search, however, failed to produce results and the Old Believers maintained that the reason was the involvement of Germans, to whom the saint did not want to reveal its place of burial. After the Second World War, the number of nuns dropped radically and after 1968 there were only two nuns and four *bielice*, or nuns who have just taken their holy orders. Pursuant to the last will of the last convent superior, Antonina Kondratiewna, of 1971, and against protests of the Old Believer community in Wojnowo, the convent went into private hands. Currently, the convent owners look after the last two *poślusznice*, or unordained nuns observing the vows of virginity, living in the convent.

The other convent in Wojnowo was established by the shepherd of the Edinoviertsy (United Faith) parish, father Aleksander Awajew in 1930s. The convent was attached to the Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God, erected in 1922. Before the World War 2, there lived some 10 nuns, most of whom left for Germany after 1945. After the demise of father Awajew, the convent had no nuns, but was reopened in 1995.

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