

Fairs

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Fairs played an important part in the life of old cities. First of all, they determined and set the rhythm of trade activities influencing the entirety of the city economy. But the role of fairs was not limited only to economy. The time of fairs was the time of meetings of people of different cultures and languages.

These meetings constituted a kind of melting pot where various plots and values were combined. It was then that the visitors learned about local traditions and customs enriching the local tissue with their own customs. The meetings also performed social functions, as the inns and taverns filled with visitors gave profit to the owners who, in turn, employed various hands and 'kitchen maids' for this period. During the fair the law in the city was also changed. The strict regulations limiting the commercial rights of 'visitors', that is merchants from other cities, were suspended, whereas the penal law guarding the safety of thousands-strong crowds became more severe. The impact of fairs was so large that many cities preserved traces of them in the form of art festivals, folk picnics and fairs that remained included in the calendar under the date upon which there used to be the local fairs. Kraków is one of these cities.

The oldest references to the Kraków fairs date back to **1310**. Even then the city had three fairs described in detail by the free will regulations of the city council of 1432. The first fair of the year was called **St. Stanislaus' Fair** or **Holy Cross Fair**. The name obviously originated from the church holidays taking place in May. It lasted 10 days and 2 half-days, starting from the **3rd of May**. The second fair was known colloquially as *little* and officially as **St. Vitus' Fair**. It started on the **11th of June** and lasted 5 days and 2 half-day. The third one, popularly called the *autumn fair*, appears in the sources as the **Michaelmas Fair**. It probably lasted as long as the spring fair. The tradition of these three fairs turned out to be very vivid and survived till the partitions. In the 1770s and the 1780s King Stanisław August Poniatowski tried to introduce new fairs in Kraków, but he was prevented by the flat and uncompromising objection from the *Merchants' Congregation*. At that time Kraków merchants were in such a poor condition that they were afraid of any competition from foreign merchants.

It is also worth adding that, apart from the Kraków ones, there were also three fairs at Kazimierz. The oldest one awarded by **Władysław Jagiełło (1399) on St. Martin's Day** took place in November, while the others, **St. Bartholomew's** and **St. John the Baptist's Fairs**, were organised in the summer.

The old fairs are probably marked with the tradition of Kraków's extraordinary June. In this month the City hosts numerous cultural events (*The Lajkonik Festival*, *Wianki [Wreaths]*, enthronement of the *Sharpshooters' King*). There also may be a connections between the old fairs and the procession to Skałka originating in the 13th century that for centuries crossed Kraków filled with crowds of fair visitors. Today the traditions of old fairs are returned to us by a new tradition. From **1994** the *Christmas Fair*, a commercial and cultural event, has been taking place in the Main Market Square. Characteristic scenery and pre-Christmas atmosphere mean the event enjoys greater and greater popularity among Kraków inhabitants. Maybe it is a sign that other Kraków fairs are also worth reviving. Particularly the one in June which, in combination with *the city's name day* on the **5th of June**, may become a great event joining past traditions and the present.



**Magiczny
Kraków**

text: Michał Niezabitowski