



## Ash Wednesday Blocks

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**This peculiar tradition is known to us today only through old records. Apart from a small group of historians, no-one knows how the celebrations of Ash Wednesday looked in old Kraków. Let us listen to Józef Łepkowski who writes the following in his *Przegląd krakowskich tradycji, legend, nabożeństw, zwyczajów, przysłów i właściwości* (Review of Kraków Traditions, Legends, Services, Customs, Sayings and Peculiarities) published in 1866:**

*The Ash Wednesday custom of hanging bowls or pieces of wood on the backs of those who did not use the carnival for marriage. This custom, known as block (...) is almost common. (...) In the Rybaki and Zwierzyniec suburbs of Kraków, students, dressed up as old men and women, drag a chained block along the road, forcing every girl to help them by way of abuse and jerks. Only a ransom can free them from this harness.*

As indicated in the above-quoted text, this custom referred to those who *did not use the carnival for marriage*, that is entered *Lent* as single men or women.

This 'offence' was punished with the attachment to a wooden block that was to be dragged for the entertainment of the masses. It reminds of a similar custom of *Comber Babski* to such an extent that one cannot be sure if the author did not mix the two customs in one. But the most important element of *Ash Wednesday* celebrations was the custom of *decorating* preferably the staid townswoman with a piece of dry bowels or wood that was cleverly attached to the 'back façade' of the passing woman. The inestimable Ambroży Grabowski (d. 1868) also describes the block custom:

*In Kraków for a long time there was and still is a custom that on Ash Wednesday street boys run and pin pieces of wood, bones, egg shells, etc. on the backs of Jews, peasant women and servants. Sometimes they purposely send the person with an attached block on some errand to the city. Knowing nothing about their treachery, they walk the streets and everyone behind them laughs.*

The National Museum in Kraków stores a painting by painter Hipolit Lipiński, who died at a young age, entitled *Celebrations of Ash Wednesday at the Kraków Main Market Square*. The figures in the painting, wearing dynamic expressions characteristic of Lipiński's work, depicts a crowd of lads, girls and serious burghers whirling on the surface of the market square. Some run away, while others chase them; some try to get their way and decorate the selected person with their block, while others nervously try to avoid this. One thing is certain: everyone is having great time. This canvas was painted about 1875, so the *block* tradition had to be still observed at that time. But it soon disappeared. Where did it come from? Why did it disappear? Unfortunately, this we do not know.

*text: Michał Niezabitowski*