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A New Online Resource on the History of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania: *The Uniate Collection*

The Vilnius University Library (VUL) launched a new digital collection of historical documents – *The Uniate Collection*.¹ This collection aims to accumulate documents scattered across various fonds of the VUL related to the history of the Greek Catholic Church, offering everyone interested the opportunity to explore one of the largest religious communities in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) that existed from 1596 to 1839.

In the 17th to early 19th centuries, the Greek Catholic religious community was called the Uniate Church. This name emerged after the Union of Brest, which announced the unification of the Orthodox Ruthenians with the Holy See of Rome. The Uniate Church struggled for many decades for recognition until it was granted state status in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Before this, Uniates faced criticism from Latin Rite Catholic clergy who strove to unite them with Roman Catholics. On the other side, Russia also constantly sought to destroy this Church by converting believers to the Orthodox Church. These tendencies were opposed by Uniate leaders, educated monks, and some noble families of the GDL. The autonomy of the Ruthenian Uniates was supported by the Popes of Rome and the rulers of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. A significant turning point occurred in 1791 when the Uniate Metropolitan of Kyiv was invited to sit in the king's council – the senate. This invitation meant the recognition of the Uniates as a fully-fledged religious community with all the rights and freedoms previously enjoyed only by Latin Rite Catholics. However, a few decades later, the Uniate Church was abolished within the territories of the Russian Empire.

Despite its complex history, the Uniate Church left a unique cultural heritage. Ruthenian Uniates created a particular religious tradition combining the elements of Eastern and Western Christianity. Today, the historical legacy of the Uniates serves as a reminder of the importance of tolerance in a multi-confessional society.

The Uniate Collection includes various types of digitized documents – manuscripts, printed books, land property plans, and visual materials. The handwritten documents are selected from various collections of the VUL Manuscript Division, such as F3 (Treatises and Scholarly Works), F4 (Inventories), F5 (Mixed), F13 (Academia et Universitas Vilnensis), F46 (Vilnius Public Library and Museum of Antiquities. Iconography), F48 (Autograph Collection), and F59 (Leonas Povilas and Aleksandras Sapiega). The digitized documents cover a wide range of

topics, such as the administration of Uniates, property issues, economic life, education, religious culture, monastic activities, book printing, trade, and so on.

Some handwritten documents are worth mentioning, including two autographs of St. Josaphat Kuntsevych, the Uniate Church's hierarch and Saint martyr (signatures: F48-32663, F5-A83-12199-12221), official papers of GDL rulers (sign.: F80-22, F48-32723), documents of the Laurushava Uniate Seminary from 1815-1816 (sign.: F13-193), and others.

The Uniate Collection also includes graphic works stored in the VUL Division of Graphic Arts. For instance, there are digitized images of Uniate relics, such as the famous icons of the Blessed Virgin Mary (sign.: MasJ IA-1, CarM IA-1).

Many documents in the digital collection consist of the official papers and writings of the Order of Saint Basil the Great. In early modern period, this order was considered “the heart and head” of the Ruthenian nation. The Basilians were active in pastoral care among Ruthenians, but were also notable for establishing schools and printing houses. An outstanding example of Basilian sociability is found in the 1798 handwritten document – a public speech by the Basilian Cesary Szolański for the opening of the new academic year (sign.: F13-229)ⁱⁱ.

Cesary Szolański (ca. 1760–1810) represents a typical educated Basilian of the second half of the 18th century, trained by the order to serve in public education. After studying philosophy at the Basilian Monastery in Vilnius, Father Cesary Szolański devoted himself to the ministry of teaching in the secular schools. He taught rhetoric and moral science (ethics) in Volodymyr, Zhytomyr, and Boruny schools. For about the last fifteen years of his life, he served in the Padubysys state school (present-day Bazilionai in Šiauliai district of Lithuania) as a teacher, student preacher, and school prefect. In his 1798 speech, Father Cesary Szolański discussed the benefits of the education and emphasized secular values. Reflecting on the state's welfare, the teacher quoted Plato, saying that a nation is happy when philosophers rule or when rulers philosophize.

A significant number of digitized objects in the *Uniate Collection* are printed items from the VUL Rare Books Division. When selecting the items, two criteria were followed: relevance to the topic of the Uniate Church and connection to the Basilian printing houses. Items are collected from such holdings of Rare Books Division as 17th-century book collection, 18th-century book collection, “Bibliotheca Academiae Vilnensis” (BAV collection), Old Lithuanian book collection, and the Medical Society Library (Med. collection). The printed books include such genre as historical works, student theses, panegyrics, sermons, and other. It is especially worth to mention the books printed in Basilian printing houses. For example, devotional books in Lithuanian printed in the Vilnius Basilian printing house (sign.: Lr 1163, Lr 718), or dissertations defended in the early 19th century at the Faculty of Medicine of Vilnius University printed in the

same printing house (sign.: Med. 4480, Med. 4475). These publications enrich the knowledge on the early modern book culture of Lithuania.

Among the printed books there is a unique 18th-century edition in Latin titled "The features of the Ruthenian Church" (Ignacy Kulczyński. *Specimen ecclesiae Ruthenicae*. Romae: Typis Hieronymi Mainardi, 1733; sign.: IV 25771).ⁱⁱⁱ In his historical treatise, which covers history from the 10th to the early 18th century, Basilian historian Ignatius Kulczyński refines and adjusts the hagiographic research of the Bollandists, especially Jesuit Daniel Papebroch (Daniël van Papenbroeck), on Eastern Orthodox Church saints.

The copy of the Kulczyński book held by the VUL is unique for 65 portraits of Ruthenian Church figures. An unknown engraver created a gallery of portraits from ancient times (e.g., Cyril the Philosopher, prince Vladimir of Kyiv, and the Great Princess Olga of Kyiv) to early 18th-century Uniate leaders – Kyiv Metropolitans Cyprian Żochowski (ca. 1635–1693), Leon Ślubicz-Załęski (1648–1708), and Leon Kiszka (1668–1728). The images of Ruthenian saints and theologians are interspersed among the Uniate leaders – for instance, Saint Paraskeva of Polotsk, founder of the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, Saint Anthony, Ruthenian theologian Meletius Smotrytsky, Saint Josaphat Kuntsevych, and others. The sequence of numbers engraved into the images indicates they were created specifically for this book, however until now, both historians and bibliographers (including Polish bibliographer Karol Estreicher) were unaware of this unique copy with the portraits.

Today, *The Uniate Collection* contains 181 digitized objects, but the Library continues to search for and select materials to provide the public with unique resources related to GDL religious history. Primarily, the VUL librarians are expected to digitize documents exhibited in the 2023 jubilee exhibition dedicated to the 400th anniversary of the martyrdom of the Saint Josaphat Kuntsevych.

Illustrations:

Saint Josaphat Kuntsevych's autograph in the 1609 document (VUL F5-A83-12199-12221).

Portraits of the Uniate Church leaders from Ignatius Kulczyński's book "Specimen ecclesiae Ruthenicae" (VUL IV 25771).

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ⁱ <https://kolekcijos.biblioteka.vu.lt/en/uniate-collection>

ⁱⁱ *Mowa przy otwarciu Szkół Podubiskich w Powiecie Szawelskim Xięstwa Żmudzkiego leżących. Miana przez X. Cezarego Szolayskiego Nauczyciela wymowy*. 1798-09-19.

https://kolekcijos.biblioteka.vu.lt/objects/VUB01_000697128#00001

ⁱⁱⁱ https://kolekcijos.biblioteka.vu.lt/objects/VUB01_001233013#00001