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THE NADBUŻAŃSKIE BLACK CATTLE IN THE PAGES OF HISTORY

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Abstract

The Nadbużańskie Black cattle, until recently considered extinct, were part of the rural economy along the Bug River from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Literature from that period emphasized their resilience, low environmental requirements, relatively good milk yield, as well as endurance and suitability for work as draft oxen. With the death of Ludwik Górski – owner of the breeding herd in Sterdyń – and the outbreak of World War I, breeding of this cattle declined. In 2023, several animals resembling the Nadbużańskie Black type were discovered; they are currently kept in two herds within the historical range of the breed. Searches for additional animals of this type are ongoing. The aim of this study was to document the history of the breed, collect sources describing its phenotypic traits and significance in breeding culture, and establish a basis for its restoration and inclusion in the genetic resources conservation programme. This work serves as an introduction to further research on the identification and protection of the Nadbużańskie Black cattle as an element of biodiversity and the cultural heritage of the Polish countryside.

Keywords: cattle, Nadbużańskie Black, native breed, restoration, genetic resources conservation

Introduction

In the Kingdom of Poland, along the Bug River, there once occurred primitive cattle with black, brown or red coats, referred to in early twentieth-century literature as Nadbużańskie cattle. Breeding work on this breed had been carried out since the second half of the nineteenth century, but the breed is now considered extinct. Native and locally adapted breeds that have survived are maintained under conservation breeding because of their unquestionable value not only for animal breeding but also for history and culture. Under the Act of 10 December 2020 on the organisation of breeding and reproduction of farm animals, the National Research Institute of Animal Production is responsible for coordinating the conservation of animal genetic resources in Poland, including cattle. Activities aimed at conserving endangered cattle breeds began as early as the 1970s, and the formal conservation programmes, with subsequent updates,

that remain in force today successively covered Polish Red cattle (1999), White-backed cattle (2003) – breeds regarded as native – followed by Polish Red-and-White cattle (2007) and Polish Black-and-White cattle (2008), which are regarded as locally adapted breeds. The history of these breeds is very well documented in literature from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many source texts describing the beginnings of efforts to develop native cattle breeds mention black cattle alongside Polish Red and White-backed cattle. Nadbużańskie Black cattle can therefore be regarded as one of the autochthonous breeds.

Although conservation breeds are of less economic importance, they play an important role in maintaining species biodiversity. They are also living evidence of the breeding concepts developed by Polish breeders over centuries. In view of the increasing sensitivity of highly improved breeds to changing environmental conditions, conservation breeds that have not been subjected to intensive selection constitute a reservoir of valuable genetic combinations that have enabled adaptation to various, sometimes difficult, environments over many generations. In the context of climate change, traits such as high resistance to pathogens, low feed selectivity, efficient use of available feeds and the ability to recover condition rapidly may prove as important as high milk production in commercial breeds. The aim of this study is to document the history of Nadbużańskie Black cattle and to establish a basis for their restoration and inclusion in a genetic resources conservation programme.

History

The first descriptions of Nadbużańskie Black cattle date from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when attempts were made to characterize and classify the domestic cattle population (Chaniewski, 1905; Malsburg, 1894; Moczarski, 1917; Ostromęcki, 1903; Barański, 1887) (Fig. 1). At that time, there was lively debate about domestic cattle breeds (Kuczyński, 1902; Moszyński, 1903; 1904; Nitkowski, 1901). Nitkowski (1906) listed four valuable native breeds: Vistula White-backed cattle, black cattle from the Narew and Bug River regions, and Polish Red cattle. He stated that local black cattle were more numerous than red cattle along the Bug River and also mentioned the Sterdyń estate, where the first herd of local black cattle was established thanks to the commitment and work of Ludwik Górski. Ludwik Górski (1818–1908) was a Polish social and political activist, landowner and agronomist. He was among the first in the Kingdom of Poland to introduce progressive farming methods and worked to transform relations with peasants; he contributed to "Roczniki Gospodarstwa Krajowego" and, from 1856, was one of the initiators and founders of the Agricultural Society. As reported by Miszewski (1899), after the entire herd had been slaughtered in 1852 because of rinderpest, the owner of Sterdyń purchased several dozen cows and heifers from peasants and petty nobility from the areas along the Bug and Liwiec rivers and noticed among them a number of animals of uniform appearance and conformation that were valued locally for their milk yield and resistance to disease. According to Klecki (1904), a large number of cattle representing the primitive black type were kept near Kamieńczyk Wielki in present-day Mazowieckie Province. He explained that the breed could remain relatively pure because the area was somewhat isolated from major routes and trading centres and lacked large landed estates, which, as he wrote, reflected "the disposition of the local petty nobility, strongly attached to old traditions and avoiding all novelty". Consequently, many such cattle could be found at fairs held in towns and settlements of the Nur region and Podlasie. The foundation stock used for breeding at the Sterdyń estate therefore consisted of animals purchased from peasant farms near places such as Kamieńczyk Wielki, Zawisty, Tymianki, Ceranów and Chądzyń, as well as at the aforementioned fairs.

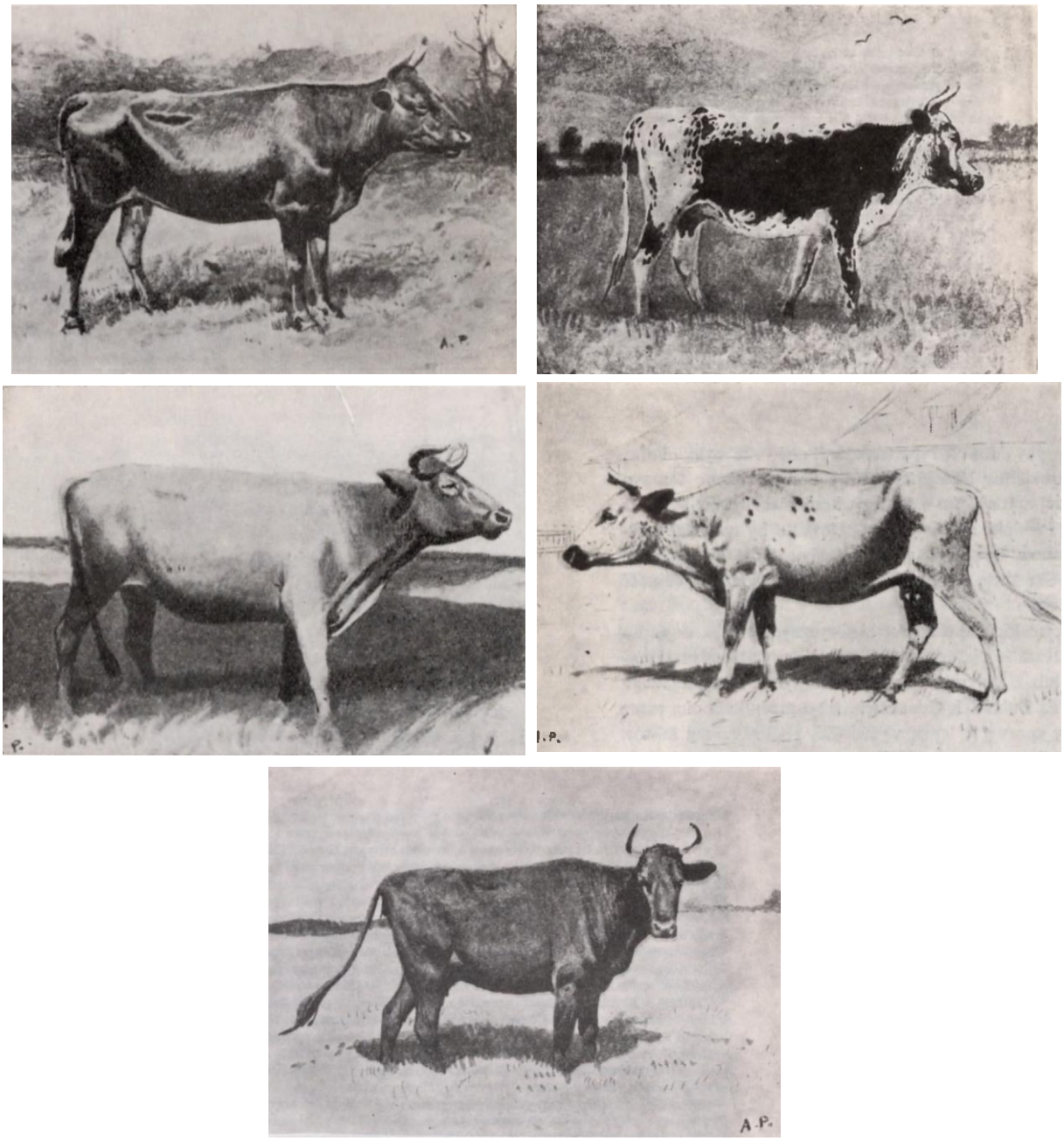


Fig. 1. Illustrations by Andrzej Piotrowski from 1904 depicting native cattle breeds. In order: Polish Red cow, White-backed cattle, Steel-grey cow, Żuławska cow and Nadbużańska Black cow (Hodowla zwierząt gospodarskich w Królestwie Polskim w latach 1815–1918, W. Pruski, 1969)

A detailed description of Nadbużańskie Black cattle was prepared by Walerian Klecki, a professor at the Jagiellonian University, together with his students August Dehnel, Wacław Zakrzewski and Zygmunt Ihnatowicz, who in 1899 and 1902 took detailed measurements of cattle from Sterdyń and the surrounding area (Fig. 2). Their work resulted in a two-part study of Nadbużańskie cattle, focusing particularly on body measurements and comparisons with other breeds. The first part concerned the history and general measurements, whereas the second provided a detailed description of the skull and head (Klecki, 1904; 1906).



Fig. 2. “A group of Nadbużańskie cattle from a barn in Sterdyń (more refined, modern type)” – photograph by W. Klecki from 1903.

Klecki was not the only person aware of the existence of this breed. In the 1904 Questionnaire of the Cattle Breeding Delegation, prepared to investigate domestic cattle types, “black, so-called Nadbużańskie” cattle were listed alongside red cattle, White-backed cattle, Żuławy cattle and white-headed cattle (Pruski, 1969). In the newspaper “Gospodarz” from 1906, a reader asked in the questions-and-answers section where domestic cattle could be found. Jan Ostromęcki replied by mentioning, among other examples, the black-cattle herd at Sterdyń, which “was distinguished by uniformity and milk yield” (Ostromęcki, 1906). Numerous discussions in the agricultural press and the presence of these cattle at exhibitions indicate that the breed was recognized within Polish breeding culture.

Nadbużańskie Black cattle at livestock exhibitions

Nadbużańskie Black cattle were shown at national exhibitions in Warsaw, Radom and Częstochowa. At the 1897 livestock exhibition in Warsaw, a group of Nadbużańskie Black cattle was presented, and Ludwik Górski, who exhibited them, received recognition for his “efforts to develop a domestic cattle breed”. During the exhibition, an event occurred that attracted considerable attention in breeding circles: a Nadbużańskie Black cow on display gave birth to a red-coated calf (Ryx, 1897). Oral accounts from breeders of Polish Red cattle also indicate that black-coated calves occasionally occurred in the Polish Red population. In 1899, at a livestock exhibition in Radom, Maria Lewicka from Regów near Dęblin presented two native black cows and a pair of black oxen (Chaniewski, 1899), for which she received a bronze medal. A group of Nadbużańskie Black cattle from Sterdyń was exhibited for the last time in 1909 at the Industry and Agriculture Exhibition in Częstochowa. Marta Krasińska, who exhibited them, received one gold medal, one silver medal and two bronze medals. Two heifers also received certificates

of merit, while the bull "Herod" was described in the press as a very fine animal, although with a less than favourable temperament. At the same exhibition, Ludwik Górski, nephew of the owner of Sterdyń who had died in 1908, also presented his animals. His red Nadbużańskie cattle received three silver medals, one bronze medal and two certificates of merit (Ostrowski, 1909).

The last evidence for the continued existence of Nadbużańskie Black cattle is a film from the 1970s concerning the establishment of the Grądy-Woniecko State Agricultural Farm, in which small black cattle of characteristic conformation are driven with other animals along a field road. Among the cattle, Żuławy, White-backed, Polish Red and steel-grey cattle can readily be recognized. Animal-breeding textbooks published at that time already referred to the Nadbużańskie Black breed only as extinct, attributing its disappearance to limited interest in breeding it. Polish Red, White-backed and Żuławy cattle survived to the present day and are now covered by conservation breeding programmes, which have helped preserve traits of these old cattle, including high resistance and excellent adaptation to difficult environmental conditions.

Characteristic traits

Coat colour

The black coat was regarded as the most characteristic feature of the breed. Klecki (1904) distinguished three coat-colour types among black cattle: uniformly black; black with rusty patches or white markings; and black with extensive white markings, white facial areas, white legs and belly, sometimes black-and-white pied. Cattle of the first type were rare. Some animals had a black dorsal stripe on a lighter back or a so-called "deer muzzle", i.e. a lighter ring around the muzzle or, conversely, a dark ring against a lighter background. Most commonly kept were black cattle with a rusty tint, either without markings or with small white markings such as stars on the forehead, small patches on the udder or white hairs in the tail switch. Rostafiński (1920), citing Zakrzewski, reported that the colour was not purely black: when viewed against the light, almost all animals showed some rusty tinge, and in some individuals distinct rusty colouring occurred on particular parts of the body, especially the perineum, inner surfaces of the hind legs and partly the forelegs, sometimes the dewlap and thighs, as well as the belly, udder and milk escutcheon. The forelock also contained many rusty hairs. A rusty dorsal stripe with a narrow black band in the centre was described, and most animals had larger or smaller white patches on the belly and partly on the udder, generally on the underside; these patches were usually small but sometimes formed a broad band along the centre of the belly. Wiśniewski (1919) stated that these cattle were related to Polish Red cattle.

Body conformation

Descriptions prepared by Klecki's students indicate that Nadbużańskie cattle were of medium size. On the basis of the ratio of height to body length, they were classified as relatively tall. Measured height at the sacrum ranged from 122 to 142.5 cm. Their general conformation indicated a dairy type with some tendency toward fattening, expressed in a capacious chest. Intercostal spaces were described as narrow and the ribs as not very broad. The topline was fairly even, with a slight sway. The withers were not prominent, but were long and narrow. The shoulder was steep. The authors described a long head with a short forehead and a small distance between the horn bases. The horns were of medium length, white at the base and black at the tips. Udders and milk veins were well developed, indicating good dairy potential. Long legs were also noted. The authors disagreed regarding skin thickness: Zakrzewski considered it fairly thick, Ihnatowicz thin, and Dehnel of medium thickness. A cow weighed about 450 kg (Klecki, 1904).

The animals identified at present represent a dairy type with slightly marked fattening traits. They are small, with flat muscle profiles, fine bone and an elongated muzzle. The measured cows ranged from 116 to 141.5 cm in height at the sacrum, which is consistent with historical measurements (Klecki, 1904). The measured bulls were 130 and 136 cm high at the sacrum. Their heights at the withers were 127 and 134 cm, respectively, making them taller than the two-year-old black bull measured by Ihnatowicz, for which this measurement was 123 cm (Klecki, 1904).

Production traits

Nadbużańskie cattle were late-maturing. Calves were born weighing about 25 kg, and heifers were first mated after reaching two years of age, with full development attained at five years. Studies by various authors who listed Nadbużańskie Black cattle among domestic breeds indicate good milk yield (Kossak, 1901). According to Miszewski (1899), average yield in 1897/1898 was about 2,460 litres. Similar production data are given by Klecki (1904), who also reported a maximum yield of 3,816 litres. Miszewski's (1899) results presented in Table 1 indicate the dairy potential of Nadbużańskie cows, which, even under somewhat poorer feeding conditions, were not inferior to Dutch cows. Their milk also had a high fat content of approximately 3.35% (Miszewski, 1897).

Table 1. Comparison of milk yield of Black cattle with other breeds (original spelling retained; Miszewski, 1899)

Breed	Average live weight	Milk yield (litres)	Milk yield reduced to 1000 pounds live weight
Amsterdam Dutch	up to 700 kg	3500	2630
Groningen Dutch	600	2800	1910
East Friesian	600	3000	2040
Oldenburg	600	3200	2200
Angler	380	2600	2680
Jersey	300	2000	2730
Brown Swiss	600	3000	2400
Fribourg	1000	3000	1230
Simmental	700	2400	1310
Dutch in Sterdyń	550	2485	1912
Black domestic breed, average of eight years	450	2162	1965
Black domestic breed, 1897–98	450	2460	2236

Adaptability and resistance

Miszewski (1897) wrote that "over the last thirty years, a very strong movement has developed among breeders to identify and improve local cattle breeds without crossing them with other breeds". He further noted that frequent epidemic diseases, such as scrofula, consumption, contagious pleuropneumonia and tuberculosis, caused either by excessive refinement of breeds or by their inability to acclimatize, as well as uneconomical feed requirements, especially for intensive feeding, prompted breeders to search for cattle originally raised in a given locality.

Breeders undoubtedly placed great hopes for the development of the breed in improving its dairy traits; nevertheless, Nadbużańskie Black cattle were renowned for exceptional hardiness and resistance to difficult environmental conditions. According to historical descriptions and oral accounts from local breeders, these cattle show high tolerance of harsh environments. They occurred in areas that were periodically flooded and at the same time exposed to drought. The Bug River basin is characterized by diverse ecosystems. Wetlands along the river provide habitats for many plant and animal species, while forests, meadows and peatlands also occur. From the perspective of crop and livestock production, these are demanding areas. The predominance of podzolic soils together with brown soils and alluvial soils creates specific conditions for local agriculture, which has adapted to these soil characteristics. During drought, the cattle were able to make use even of poor-quality feed. Oral accounts indicate that they sometimes fed on moss or heather and were grazed in nearby forests or marshes because better land was reserved for crops. Their adaptive mechanisms therefore included tolerance of periodic feed shortages and very efficient use of low-quality forage. Their small size, light build and widely spaced claws facilitated movement over soft, waterlogged ground. Like other conservation cattle breeds, they are characterized by very high resistance to parasites and diseases. Historical accounts indicate that, like Polish Red cattle, they were resistant to rinderpest (Typhus bovum contagiosus), which caused severe losses at the end of the nineteenth century.

Recent history

In 2023, several cows resembling Nadbużańskie Black cattle, a breed considered extinct since the 1970s, were identified near the border between Mazowieckie and Podlaskie provinces (Sosin et al., 2024). In February 2023, information on Nadbużańskie Black cattle was presented during the "Rasa Rodzima" culinary workshops in Pułtusk. Tomasz Godlewski, a breeder attending the meeting, stated that animals of this type still occurred and were occasionally available at cattle purchasing points. At the beginning of April that year, he sent photographs of small, primitively built black cows taken on a farm near Stara Osuchowa, which prompted the initiation of research. Between June and August, material consisting of hairs with roots was collected and submitted for analysis to Professor Anna Radko at the National Research Institute of Animal Production. Nadbużańskie Black cattle were first officially mentioned in November during the Genetic Forum organized in Balice by the Polish Federation of Cattle Breeders and Dairy Farmers.

In the following year, in February, the first report on research into Nadbużańskie Black cattle was presented at the annual Winter School for Cattle Breeders. On 18 April 2024, at a specially organized conference at the Museum of Agriculture in Ciechanowiec, the first results of literature, phenotypic and genetic studies were presented. A group of animals representing the Nadbużańskie Black type was also shown. During the summer of the same year, further searches were carried out within the breed's historical range for animals corresponding to descriptions in the literature (Fig. 3).

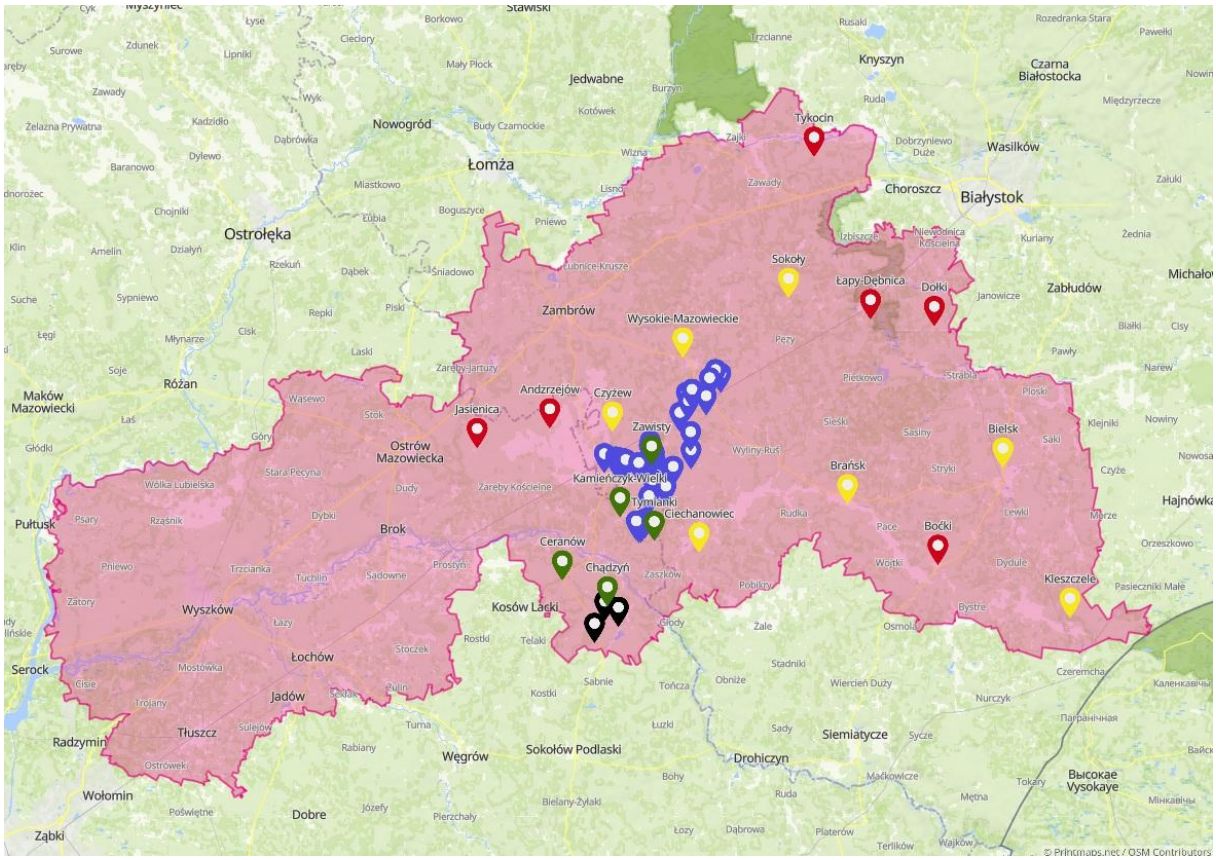


Fig. 3. Map showing the distribution area of the Nadbużańskie Black cattle based on literature data. The Sterdyń estate with its farms: Paulinów and Seroczyn (in black), places where Ludwik Górski bought animals for his barn (in green), fairs where Nadbużańskie Black cattle appeared (in yellow), localities where Zygmunt Ihnatowicz counted "cattle of the Nur region" (in blue), and other localities mentioned in the literature as places where black cattle were found (in red)

Animals corresponding to descriptions of Nadbużańskie Black cattle were sought in the vicinity of, among other places, Kamieńczyk Wielki, Przewóz Nurski, Ciechanowiec, Kosów Lacki, Wólka Rytelska, Jakubiki, Wszebory and Stara Osuchowa, as well as in Tymianki, Boguty and Zawisty. On 2 October 2024, another meeting was held, this time with local residents who remembered Nadbużańskie Black cattle. The purpose was to collect testimony confirming that these animals had once been kept in the area. Participants reported that local breeders had continued to use bulls of local breeds for natural mating in their herds despite bans introduced in the 1970s. A common and long-standing tradition was to use a bull and make it available to neighbouring farms, both near and farther away, which over time contributed to greater uniformity of animal type in the region. One of the more drastic memories frequently recalled at the meeting concerned compulsory castration of bulls, often carried out without the owners' knowledge or consent. Accounts such as those provided by Stanisław Tryniszewski and Krystyna Kamińska bear witness to resistance to centrally imposed regulations. Similar stories have also been reported by breeders of other native breeds. These activities resulted in the establishment of the Czarna Nadbużańska Foundation, whose aim is to restore the native Nadbużańskie Black cattle breed, until now regarded as extinct.

Genetic studies

For genetic evaluation, material was collected from 42 animals phenotypically corresponding to Nadbużańskie Black cattle (36 cows and 8 young bulls) located in Nur, Kamieńczyk Wielki,

Sterdyń and the surrounding area. To establish DNA profiles based on genotyping of 12 microsatellite loci (STRs), and with a view to using the identified alleles in the future to develop tests enabling precise genetic assignment to the breed, DNA was isolated (DNA Sherlock AX; A&A Biotechnology), microsatellite sequences were amplified, capillary electrophoresis was performed on a 3500x sequencer, and DNA profiles were established. The microsatellite markers BM1818, BM1824, BM2113, ETH3, ETH10, ETH225, INRA23, SPS115, TGLA53, TGLA122, TGLA126 and TGLA227, recommended by ISAG and included in the basic STR-12-plex set used at the National Research Institute of Animal Production for cattle parentage verification, were used. Genetic structure was analysed using STRUCTURE software and a Bayesian Monte Carlo method based on Markov chains (MCMC), and the profiles were differentiated from those of breeds occurring in Poland (ZR, HO, RP, LM and others). DNA isolation, microsatellite sequence amplification, capillary electrophoresis on a 3500x sequencer and DNA profile determination were performed as described above.

The DNA profiles of the animals were compared with those of Polish Red (RP), Polish Red-and-White (ZR), Polish Holstein-Friesian Black-and-White (HO), Limousin (LM) and other beef breeds such as Black Angus and Red Angus. Several animals phenotypically similar to Nadbużańskie Black cattle and genetically distinct from the above breeds are kept on two farms in Mazowieckie Province, within the historical range of the Nadbużańskie Black cattle in Ostrów and Sokołów counties (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Cow of the Nadbużańskie Black cattle type (Sosin, 2024)

Summary and further work

Work on restoring the breed is currently underway. Animals of the Nadbużańskie Black type are being sought, particularly within the breed's historical range. The ongoing studies are intended to determine genetic distinctiveness and develop a genetic profile for the breed. The opening of a register is planned, followed in the longer term by establishment of a herd book and inclusion of the animals in a genetic resources conservation programme.

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SUMMARY

The Nadbużańskie Black cattle, until recently considered extinct, were part of the rural economy along the Bug River from the 19th century to the early 20th century. Literature from that period emphasized their resilience, low environmental requirements, relatively good milk yield, as well as endurance and suitability for work as draft oxen. With the death of Ludwik Górski – owner of the breeding herd in Sterdyń – and the outbreak of World War I, breeding of this cattle declined. In 2023, several individuals resembling the Nadbużańskie Black type were discovered, currently kept in two herds within the historical range of the breed. Searches for additional animals of this type are ongoing. The aim of this study was to document the history of the breed, to collect sources describing its phenotypic traits and significance in breeding culture, and to establish the basis for its restoration and inclusion in the genetic resources conservation program. This work serves as an introduction to further research on the identification and protection of the Nadbużańskie Black cattle as an element of biodiversity and the cultural heritage of the Polish countryside.

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