

GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE IN THE EARLY MODERN WORLD (C. 1500–1800)

KEYNOTE LECTURE

The Last Aurochs: A Global History of Extinction before Extinction

Tomasz Grusiecki, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada

From the sixteenth century onward, **Jaktorów Forest in Mazovia, Poland**, became the **final refuge of the aurochs**, a now-extinct species of long-horned wild bovid. Despite the Polish kings' sustained efforts at conservation, the last recorded specimen perished in 1627 under the watchful eye of King Sigismund III. Yet this terminal event did not register as extinction in any modern sense; rather, it unfolded within an epistemic horizon in which **species loss remained largely unthinkable**. A providential worldview resisted the notion of disappearance, and extinction as a scientific concept would only cohere in the nineteenth century. The aurochs may have vanished from Jaktorów Forest, but it was presumed to persist elsewhere—its local absence did not yet amount to species-level loss.

This lecture treats **the aurochs as a case study in what might be called extinction before extinction**: a condition in which terminal decline, epistemic opacity, and geographic displacement intersect. On this reading, a forensic engagement with early modern accounts traces the aurochs across a dispersed and unstable archive, **leading to the Americas, Muscovy, and the Arctic, and indirectly even to Africa and India**. It also draws into its orbit animals now understood as taxonomically distinct—such as the wisent and the bison—as well as mythical creatures like **the unicorn and the griffin**.

By situating the aurochs within these unsettled regimes of knowledge, the lecture reconsiders **early modern ideas of scarcity, finitude, and loss**, asking how the condition of being “the last” was apprehended in the absence of a stable concept of extinction. It further argues that early modern natural history—often read as a precursor to modern science—can instead be understood as a form of **proto-planetary reasoning**, in which local disappearance is mediated through global conjecture, and absence becomes legible only through expansive, and often speculative, geographies.

28 SEPTEMBER 2026, 17.00 — 18.30 | Faculty of Culture and Arts, University of Warsaw
Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28, 00-927 Warszawa

This activity is funded by the EUI Widening Europe Programme. The EUI Widening Europe Programme initiative, backed by contributions from the European Union and EUI Contracting States, is designed to strengthen internationalisation, competitiveness and quality in research in Widening Countries, and thus foster a more cohesive European Higher Education and Research Area.

