

***The Battle of Orsha* – court propaganda or chivalric epic?**

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Summary

The Battle of Orsha, part of the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw, an example of panel painting (1525–1535), is of paramount importance for the study of the military, as well as for the research in art history, material history, and the history of political and military elites of Central-Eastern Europe during the Renaissance. The article describes the ways Ruthenian and Lithuanian-Polish elites used material and intellectual products of chivalric culture, and tackles the problem of documentary and propagandist role of visual narrative. Since the publication of works by David Freedberg¹ and Peter Burke² the necessity to recreate the context of making, functioning, and reception of images has become evident. Daniel Arasse has further expanded methodological tools of this type of research³. However, there are still numerous artworks whose historical and social context has either remained untouched by research, or has been researched insufficiently. Repeatedly, it has led to misinterpretations of such artworks in spite of their major position in culture. *The Battle of Orsha* is a spectacular example of this process.

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Artwork description

- [1] *The Battle of Orsha* (tempera on oak board, 165×260 cm), just like the best paintings of Renaissance battle painting, is remarkable for its epic composition, realistic rendition of figures (there are at least several hundred of them in the picture), the attention to depict luxurious objects and their owners, as well as an almost critical number of details. (fig. 1) The painting represents the tradition of German painting of Late Gothic and Early Renaissance (15th–16th century), with closest analogies being Albrecht Altdorfer's *The Battle of Alexander at Issus* and Jörg Breu's *The Battle of Zama*. It was supposed to be

¹ David Freedberg, *Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago 1989; David Freedberg, *Potęga wizerunków. Studia z historii i teorii oddziaływania*, Kraków 2005.

² Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, New York 2001; Peter Burke, *Naoczność: materiały wizualne jako świadectwa historyczne*, Kraków 2012.

³ Daniel Arasse, *Le Détail. Pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture*, Paris 1992; Daniel Arasse, *Detal. Historia malarstwa w zbliżeniu*, Kraków 2013.

and it was viewed in reference to these works⁴. However, even the very first look at the painting surprises an insightful researcher, and the more details are noticed the more troublesome the general interpretation becomes. All similarities of style and technique between the three paintings fade in contrast to differences stemming from an analysis of content, plot, and iconography. Altdorfer's and Breu's paintings interpret events from ancient history and include numerous allegorical and symbolic references. On the other hand, *The Battle of Orsha* presents historical events and real people, and the way they are represented corresponds with what one finds in historical documents. The battle took place on 8 September 1514 in what is now Belarus and confronted Lithuanian-Ruthenian and Polish army with the army of the Grand Duchy of Moscow. It ended with the victory of the former. The central figure of the picture is the hetman of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, an Orthodox Christian Ruthenian, prince Konstanty Ostrogski. Other figures, next to Poles, Lithuanians, and Muscovites, include Tartars. Among several hundred figures one can also find Hungarians, Serbians, and Italians. The author presents them on the background of faithfully depicted geographical terrain. As an art work documenting reality, the picture is closer to the tradition of Italian battle painting: the three-part *Battle of San Romano* (1435–1440?) by Paolo Uccello, or to the series of tapestries *The Battle of Pavia* made (around 1528–1531) according to cartoons by Bernard van Orley, where influences of various artistic trends can be discerned.



1 *The Battle of Orsha*, tempera on oak boards, 1525–1535. The National Museum in Warsaw, inventory no. MP 2575. Photo: Piotr Ligier, Museum Photo Studio

⁴ Alwin Schulz, "Über ein Gemälde wahrscheinlich von Georg Preu (polnische Schlacht aus dem Anfänge des 16. Jh.)", in: *Schlesiens Vorzeit in Bild und Schrift*, vol. 3, Breslau 1877, 180; Jakob Caro, "Die Schlacht bei Orsza 1514 (Nach dem grossen Bilde im Museum Schlesischer Altertümer)", in: *Schlesiens Vorzeit in Bild und Schrift*, vol. 3, Breslau 1879, 345–353; Jan Białostocki, "Zagadka Bitwy pod Orszą", in: *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* 1 (1955), 80–98.

- [2] The date when the painting was made is not certain. This matter is still being debated, with little light shed by dendrochronological research conducted in 1992, which indicated the year 1525 as the earliest possible date, and the period after 1530 as possible. The opinions on this matter vary significantly – the possible date when the picture was painted is set between 1515 (right after the battle)⁵ and 1540⁶. The author was most certainly German, yet up to now it has not been possible to establish his identity, despite the fact that in the years 1515–1544 there were few specialists able to realise a commission of such scale, and being acquainted with Italian battle painting tradition, as well as military reality of Eastern Europe. Of little help was the presence of a figure whose gesture (the right hand making a typical painter's gesture of framing the space of the future painting⁷) and appearance (it is the only figure with no weapons or armour) suggest that it is the artist's self-portrait. In 1980 Zdzisław Żygulski stated that previous researchers had ignored this figure⁸. It seems that it is still being ignored. This motif deserves a separate study, especially that the figure of knight standing next to the artist points in his direction with a lance with a Radziwiłł family coat of arms on the pennon. It is usually assumed that the artist was linked with the workshop of the Cranachs. (fig. 2)



2 *The Battle of Orsha*. Fragment with an assumed author of the painting, tempera on oak boards, 1525–1535. The National Museum in Warsaw, inventory no. MP 2575. Photo: Piotr Ligier, Museum Photo Studio

- [3] The painting reveals the influence of Albrecht Dürer as well, most distinct in the depiction of the so-called Orsha cannon shown in the right-hand bottom part of the picture. At

⁵ Zdzisław Żygulski suggested that the painting was commissioned by king Sigismund I the Old on the occasion of the Vilnius Congress of 1515. Zdzisław Żygulski jun., "Bitwa pod Orszą – struktura obrazu", w: Zdzisław Żygulski jun., *Światła Sztambulu*, Warszawa 1999, 253–290, here 257, 289.

⁶ Mieczysław Morka, *Sztuka dworu Zygmunta I Starego. Treści polityczne i propagandowe*, Warszawa 2006.

⁷ Żygulski jun., "Bitwa pod Orszą – struktura obrazu", 273.

⁸ Zdzisław Żygulski jun., "The Battle of Orsha – an explication of the arms, armour, costumes, accoutrements and other matters ...", in: *Art, Arms and Armour*, Chiasso 1979–1980, 109–143, here 123.

some point it became a subject of a heated debate among Polish scholars⁹. Recently, Dieter Koepplin suggested that the work was painted by Hans Krell¹⁰, a painter known entirely as a portraitist. This thesis may seem plausible, since even the faces of second- and third-ground figures are depicted in smallest detail. Nevertheless, all the above-mentioned theses lack substantial support in historical sources.

- [4] According to the rules of Renaissance battle painting, the picture should praise the victors. However, the winners seem here more like professionals at work, rather than majestic triumphant warriors, while the defeated are depicted in a pity-provoking manner.
- [5] The choice of the medium of painting is of certain importance, as well. Undoubtedly, it is a means of symbolic communication, yet one needs to answer the question about the aim of using this form – royal propaganda, glorification of Polish-Lithuanian aristocracy, or perhaps depicting representatives of the class of nobility? Researchers are not in concord as to the person of the founder, which makes the task of establishing the original function and role of the painting very difficult. Apart from the Polish king and the Grand Duke of Lithuania, Sigismund I, possible founders are indicated as one of the Ostrogski¹¹ or Radziwiłł¹² princes, the most powerful prince dynasties in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the first half of the 16th century. Yet, historical sources offer no support of these speculations.

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Aesthetic aspects

- [6] Aesthetic aspects of the painting deserve to be discussed, and they may aid in further search for its author. Within the framework of a singular composition the author succeeded in creating a clear, logical, coherent and – what is most crucial – historically verifiable visual narrative on key battle events. He depicted all the details, as well as remarkably expressively presented both the victors, as well as the defeated. Medieval simultaneity was used with Renaissance mastery. The narrative corresponds with historical texts about the battle. It needs to be noted that to realise similar commission Bernard van Orley, the author of cartoons for the tapestries showing the Battle of Pavia, needed as many as seven separate compositions. The composition of *Orsha* successfully applies several new original ways of depicting military events. Just like any other great

⁹ Zofia Stefańska, "Działo orszańskie", in: *Muzealnictwo Wojskowe* 1 (1959), 359–366; Jan Białostocki, "Czy Dürer naśladował Bitwę pod Orszą?", in: *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* 3 (1969), 276–281.

¹⁰ Dieter Koepplin, *Neue Werke von Lukas Cranach und ein altes Bild einer polnischen Schlacht – von Hans Krell?*, Basel 2003.

¹¹ Andrzej Dzieciółowski, Macej Monkiewicz, "The Battle of Orsza", in: *Polish Commonwealth treasures. On the history of Polish collecting from the 13th century to the late 18th*, Olszanica 2003, 116–120.

¹² Piotr Oszczanowski, "Śląskie losy kolekcji dzieł sztuki księżnej Ludwiki Karoliny Radziwiłłówny (1667–1695)", in: *Roczniki Sztuki Śląskiej* 22 (2011), 204–215.

work of art, *The Battle of Orsha* significantly transcends the limits of the genre. The author excelled at transforming the visual story of the battle into a picture documenting the culture and customs of the nobility.

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The non-aesthetic functions of the painting

- [7] For obvious reasons, each painting makes a bigger impression on those who look at it than on those who read about it. In case of *The Battle of Orsha* the imposing historiography, written in at least five languages, does not translate into the popularity of the work outside Poland.
- [8] In the second half of the 19th century the painting was found in Wrocław. It was first noticed by German art historians, who made the original attribution¹³. The first publication by Polish scholars was written by Stanisław Herbst and Michał Walicki. In many ways, it has preserved its validity up to this day. Its theses on the undoubted documentary value of the painting stemming from the participation of the author in the battle, on the faithful depiction of the arms, battle formations and combat techniques, despite earlier criticism, seem to be relevant¹⁴. Jan Białostocki presented an extended set of visual analogies with the painting and discussed several borrowed motifs. In his opinion, the composition reveals the influence of Albrecht Dürer, Hans Burgkmair, Lukas Cranach, and Niklas Stoer. The author shows a remarkable knowledge of their art. Białostocki is right to acknowledge the painter's artistic priorities. According to Białostocki, he was more interested in the faithful depiction of details and actual events than in any kind of compositional elegance, which would explain such naturalistic rendition of the horrors of the battle¹⁵. Zdzisław Żygulski's work with carefully presented fragments of the painting was first published in Switzerland in English¹⁶. This high quality text, which over time has not lost any of its literary quality or academic relevance, was addressed to Western-European scholars of military and to armament specialists, yet it seems it did not impress them the way it should have. For example, it was completely overlooked in major comprehensive studies of the history of arms, such as Ewart Oakeshott's work¹⁷. Nevertheless, Zdzisław Żygulski came back to this topic on numerous occasions¹⁸.

¹³ Caro, *Die Schlacht bei Orsza 1514*, 345–353.

¹⁴ Stanisław Herbst and Michał Walicki, "Obraz bitwy pod Orszą. Dokument historii sztuki i wojskowości", in: *Rozprawy Komisji Historii Sztuki i Kultury Towarzystwa Naukowego Warszawskiego*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1949, 33–68.

¹⁵ Jan Białostocki, "Zagadka Bitwy pod Orszą", in: *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* 1 (1955), 80–98.

¹⁶ Żygulski jun., *The Battle of Orsha*, 108–143; Żygulski jun., *Bitwa pod Orszą – struktura obrazu*, 85–132.

¹⁷ Ewart R. Oakeshott, *European Weapons and Armour from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution*, Cambridge 1980.

¹⁸ Zdzisław Żygulski jun., *Słynne bitwy w sztuce*, Warszawa 1996; Zdzisław Żygulski jun., *Broń wódzów i żołnierzy*, Kraków 2001, 35–39; Zdzisław Żygulski jun., *Broń w dawnej Polsce na tle*

- [9] From the beginning of the 1980s *The Battle of Orsha* has attracted interest of Polish art historians. Mieczysław Gębarowicz placed the painting at the top of his list of masterpieces of Polish historical painting, at the same time significantly questioning its veracity as a historical source¹⁹. Teresa Jakimowicz included *The Battle of Orsha* in her book *Temat historyczny w sztuce ostatnich Jagiellonów* [Historical Themes in the Art of the Last Jagiellonians]²⁰. Searching for political and propagandist content in the art at the court of Sigismund I Mieczysław Morka reset the date when the picture was painted to after 1540 by comparing just one fragment of the work with just one woodcut by Niklas Stoer²¹. The above mentioned interpretations of the work, next to the originality of their methodological approaches, are characterised by one major flaw – their authors are more interested in their own concepts, for which *The Battle of Orsha* is a more or less important material, than in the picture itself, and its use is limited to the manipulation of several small fragments.
- [10] Even though outside the circle of Polish art historians and those interested in the broadly understood cultural studies the picture is not popular, it is being discussed very often, also abroad.
- [11] On several occasions, it was mentioned in a study by a Soviet scholar Anatolij Kirpicznikow²², as well as in an article by the Ukrainian scholar Oleksandr Galenko²³. In 2004 it was presented at an exhibition "Thesauri Poloniae" in Vienna. On this occasion there was published an article by Andrzej Dzieciółowski and Maciej Monkiewicz, where authors presented a new hypothesis as to the possible foundation of the picture by the Ostrogski princes²⁴. Recently, Piotr Oszczanowski questioned this idea, quoting archive materials from the 17th century, and linked the foundation with a different powerful Lithuanian family, the Radziwiłł²⁵.
- [12] Regardless of ongoing criticism, for Polish scholars the picture is still a major source for the study of Polish military of the first half of the 16th century. It is also important in the study of Polish cultural relations with both the West, as well as the East.

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uzbrojenia Europy i Bliskiego Wschodu, Warszawa 1982, 204–208.

¹⁹ Mieczysław Gębarowicz, *Początki malarstwa historycznego w Polsce*, Wrocław 1981, 11–16.

²⁰ Teresa Jakimowicz, *Temat historyczny w sztuce epoki ostatnich Jagiellonów*, Warszawa 1985.

²¹ Mieczysław Morka, *Sztuka dworu Zygmunta I Starego*, 293–294.

²² Анатолий Кирпичников, *Военное дело на Руси в XIII–XV вв.*, Ленинград 1976.

²³ Олександр Галенко, "Лук та рушниця в лицарській символіці українського козацтва: до питання про східно-західні впливи на Україні XVI–XVII ст", in: *Наукові записки, Історія Національний університет "Києво-Могилянська академія"*, vol. 3, Київ 1998, 49–66.

²⁴ Dzieciółowski, Monkiewicz, *The Battle of Orsha*, 116–120.

²⁵ Oszczanowski, *Śląskie losy kolekcji dzieł sztuki*.

Research objectives

- [13] Of paramount importance is an answer to the question how the picture was received by viewers at the time it was made, who these viewers were, and to what social group they belonged. Therefore, the main research premise should be to situate the picture in its original context, that is in the military reality of Central-Eastern Europe of the first three decades of the 16th century, which can best be known on the basis of artefacts and documents from this period. I am convinced that this procedure may provide answers to questions about the possible reception of late Medieval and Renaissance battle art – was it propaganda and instrument of manipulation, or a conscious document of important events? Do battle artworks differ one from the other in this respect? It needs to be noted that the accusation about the falsification of reality by Medieval and Renaissance battle painting is completely groundless, since there are no objective criteria of their "accurate" representation.

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The construction of battle narrative and the genre of the picture

- [14] Attempting to answer the question about the role of the image in cultural transmission one is tempted to formulate a definition in accordance with terminology used by practitioners of so-called cultural history: this role is to be an "informative fact", an account of the culture of noblemen and knights of Central-Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 16th century.
- [15] Up to now we have been dealing with a stereotypical reception of the picture as a typical example of propaganda of the royal court. The Battle of Orsha was considered a classic example of propagandist campaign of the Jagiellonian court. The work was supposed to effectively supplement the small success of the Polish-Lithuanian army in the war against the Grand Duchy of Moscow, as well as glorify the person of the monarch.
- [16] For several decades this thesis has been omnipresent. Polish scholars were the first to announce the thesis about the propagandist function of the work²⁶. Afterwards, it was enthusiastically received by Soviet, and later Russian historians²⁷. This thesis has suited well the main trend of Russian ideological interpretation of the 16th-century Lithuanian-Moscow wars. What is more, the ongoing discussions on the actual age of the picture (whether it was painted right after the battle, or after 1525 as suggested by dendrochronological research, after 1531, or maybe after 1540) has not changed this misconception, despite the fact that there is no direct proof that the work was commissioned by the royal court, or that it had been in Poland before 1946.

²⁶ Gębarowicz, *Początki malarstwa historycznego w Polsce*, 11–16; Żygulski jun., *The Battle of Orsha*.

²⁷ А. Кирпичников, *Военное дело на Руси*, 6–8.

- [17] The application of the word "propaganda", which has only been used after the year 1622, in reference to a work of art created almost a hundred years earlier provokes reservations of formal nature. For contemporary Western-European historians of culture, the use of the term in reference to visual material from before 1789 is an anachronism, which has been reflected in standard textbooks²⁸. In the majority of Polish studies on *The Battle of Orsha* the term is used almost mechanically. If one accepts the thesis that the phenomenon of propaganda, especially war propaganda, defined in a different way or not defined at all, has existed almost from the very beginnings of the military history of the humanity, linking the picture with this function only is a serious simplification of this phenomenal piece. The use of the term not in a historical, but in an analytic sense is equally inadequate. I understand the term "propaganda" as communicative practice that is meant to manipulate the mind of the viewer. The picture in question, on the other hand, does not use basic manipulative techniques, including the manipulation of the images of the hero and the enemy.
- [18] Sigismund I, the key subject of the Jagiellonian "propaganda", is not presented in the picture. The single image of the Polish white eagle, which can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the monarch, is placed in this part of the composition where it was really necessary – on the banner of royal court company²⁹. The eagle is not particularly emphasised and it is "iconographically equal" to the coats of arms of the Ostrogski and the Radziwiłł, also featured in the picture. There are no other signs or objects in the picture that could be formally qualified as carriers or symbols of "monarchical ideology". Assuming, of course, that at that time and place something like that existed at all (fig. 3).



3 *The Battle of Orsha*. Fragment with the royal court banner, tempera on oak boards, 1525–1535. The National Museum in Warsaw, inventory no. MP 2575. Photo: Piotr Ligier, Museum Photo Studio

- [19] Additionally, the visual narration of the picture does not use the indispensable element of military propaganda – the demonic image of the enemy. Without this the propagandist

²⁸ Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, 79.

²⁹ Dzieściółowski, Monkiewicz, *The Battle of Orsza*, 116.

structure loses coherence, compositional unity, and logical content, as the binary structure of the familiar – the hero vs. the stranger – felon or barbarian is no longer in operation. Most probably this confrontation was avoided on purpose. The Muscovite enemies were presented as equal and respectable opponents. Their appearance and arms were not caricatured (fig. 4).



4 *The Battle of Orsha*. Fragment with Muscovite units, tempera on oak boards, 1525–1535. The National Museum in Warsaw, inventory no. MP 2575. Photo: Piotr Ligier, Museum Photo Studio



5 *The Battle of Orsha*. Fragment with Muscovite units, tempera on oak boards, 1525–1535. The National Museum in Warsaw, inventory no. MP 2575. Photo: Piotr Ligier, Museum Photo Studio



6 *The Battle of Orsha*. Fragment with Muscovite units in combat, tempera on oak boards, 1525–1535. The National Museum in Warsaw, inventory no. MP 2575. Photo: Piotr Ligier, Museum Photo Studio



7 *The Battle of Orsha*. Fragment with dying Muscovites, tempera on oak boards, 1525–1535. The National Museum in Warsaw, inventory no. MP 2575. Photo: Piotr Ligier, Museum Photo Studio

- [20] Instead, they are seen fighting and dying with dignity (fig. 5–6). The dying Muscovites are depicted with such striking expressions that they can evoke pity (fig. 7). Muscovites are opponents, yet respected opponents, whose defeat brings grandeur to the victor. The dualist reception of the adversary as a situational enemy, but an existential companion, seems typical for the ethos of medieval knights and Renaissance mercenaries, with often noble background, but not for propagandist purposes.
- [21] Therefore, it is important to establish the addressee of the Orsha narrative, as well as the social and cultural circles that were able to decipher the iconography of the painting.
- [22] Military combat is the main theme of the painting. Military dress, equestrian equipment (fig. 7), weaponry and the ways it was used, blows, wounds, and corpses (figs. 8–9) were also depicted with skill and in greatest structural and anatomical detail, in plausible quantities. The details are attached one to another so closely that they create a kind of narrative code, readable only for the viewer with specialist knowledge and living within a specific culture.



8 *The Battle of Orsha*. Fragment with attacking hussars, tempera on oak boards, 1525–1535. The National Museum in Warsaw, inventory no. MP 2575. Photo: Piotr Ligier, Museum Photo Studio



9 *The Battle of Orsha*. Fragment with Polish-Lithuanian soldiers, tempera on oak boards, 1525–1535. The National Museum in Warsaw, inventory no. MP 2575. Photo: Piotr Ligier, Museum Photo Studio



10 *The Battle of Orsha*. The chaos of the battle. Fragment, tempera on oak boards, 1525–1535. The National Museum in Warsaw, inventory no. MP 2575. Photo: Piotr Ligier, Museum Photo Studio

[23] Otherwise, one may get lost in the chaos of the battle, in the fighting crowd, in masses of dying people and horses. (fig. 10) There is no doubt that the painting must have been addressed to a competent viewer who knew all about tools, concepts, and practice of combat. Also this aspect is a part of the old artistic tradition related directly to chivalric culture.

[24] Daniel Arasse once stated that such artistic conventions were justified by the demands of knightly artistic taste:

In contrast to what some say, the abundance of details is not a result of the painter being carried away by his fantasy; it is rather related to the courtly tastes popular throughout Europe, which estimated the quality of the image on the basis of what was shown, that is objects and actions, according to the value ascribed to

them by social code and court hierarchy. This tradition was still alive in the 16th century³⁰.

- [25] The requirements of a viewer of noble background in the 15th and 16th century as to the visual messages were decidedly different from the present ones. To prove this Arasse quotes a passage from Vasari's *Lives* where the author praises the lost work by Pisanello:

This St. George, wishing to replace his sword in the scabbard after slaying the Dragon, is raising his right hand, which holds the sword, the point of which is already in the scabbard, and is lowering the left hand, to the end that the increased distance may make it easier for him to sheathe the sword, which is long; and this he is doing with so much grace and with so beautiful a manner, that nothing better could be seen³¹.

- [26] To assess both the artist and the saint one needs to know that a long sword can faster be set in a combat position when its blade is not taken outside the scabbard, but when the scabbard is taken off the blade. The precision and the reflex of such a movement may sometimes save the knight's life. Due to these aspects, an unskilled viewer usually finds it difficult to decipher visual narratives similar to *Orsha*. As Daniel Arasse stated, "we no longer know the rules of knightly elegance". The mentality of the 15th-century viewers made them appreciate details that we do not notice. For them, these were elements that enriched the value of the work. Even a target group of viewers is expected by the artist to do something more than just carefully observe. It was a standard method used by European artists of the 15th and 16th century to provoke in the viewers the so-called *affectum devotionis*³². The use of this method seems justified if one decides that the author looks at the battle from the perspective of his time, as on a trial by ordeal, or on the Last Judgement, where victory is not for the more powerful, but for the more humble. The author's motives remain uncertain, yet the fact that the participants of the battle of Orsha had this kind of outlook on military reality is known thanks to the words of Jan Amor Tarnowski (1488–1561), the key participant of the battle, and the future Great Hetman of the Crown:

Although all kinds of things need certain skill, God's grace and luck determine the outcome of the fight to a greater extent than the skill, so one should not trust oneself too much, but ask God for blessing, and when God grants His mercy, one should not get excessively proud, but instead of ascribe it to one's skill, he should ascribe it to the will of God and thank Him for that. For even if as a young man one was raised in this knowledge, witnessed events, and read about many battles, one is never fully proficient in this discipline, as there must always be something that one has not taken part in, or heard of, or suspected how to solve. So one should always pray to God to grant His grace and make one successful³³.

³⁰ Arasse, *Detal*, 120–121.

³¹ Arasse, *Detal*, 121; Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of Artists*, Part II, <http://members.efn.org/~acd/vite/VasariLives.html>.

³² Arasse, *Detal*, 80–92, 120–121.

³³ Jan Tarnowski, *Consilium rationis bellicae*, Warszawa 1987, 97–99 [15–15v].

- [27] The royal eagle has been presented only once, while prince Ostrogski features there three times (figs. 11–13).



11 *The Battle of Orsha*. Prince Ostrogski. Fragment, tempera on oak boards, 1525–1535. The National Museum in Warsaw, inventory no. MP 2575. Photo: Piotr Ligier, Museum Photo Studio



12 *The Battle of Orsha*. Prince Ostrogski. Fragment, tempera on oak boards, 1525–1535. The National Museum in Warsaw, inventory no. MP 2575. Photo: Piotr Ligier, Museum Photo Studio

- [28] However, in all three cases neither the scale of the composition, nor the details of clothing or weaponry make him stand out from his brothers in arms (fig. 12). The gold-encrusted sabre and the brocade garments are also worn by at least a dozen of other figures. It is difficult to agree with the theory that the painting was supposed to glorify the hetman (fig. 13).



13 *The Battle of Orsha*. Prince Ostrogski. Fragment, tempera on oak boards, 1525–1535. The National Museum in Warsaw, inventory no. MP 2575. Photo: Piotr Ligier, Museum Photo Studio

- [29] The prince is shown not as an invincible hero, but as an experienced specialist carefully fulfilling his responsibilities, *primus inter pares*. One might say that all Polish-Lithuanian army was shown this way – as a close group of well-equipped professionals doing their work.
- [30] It is difficult to talk about the propaganda of the King Sigismund I when the picture allegedly serving this purpose features three images of the most powerful Ruthenian prince of that period, and where all characters are iconographically equal. It is also difficult to believe that the painting glorifies hetman Konstanty or any other representative of the Polish-Lithuanian elite. It is only the striking resemblance between the hetman and King Salomon from Burgkmair's woodcut that may have been meant as an emphasis of his virtues. Most probably, the similarity was achieved on purpose, especially that the prince's appearance made it possible. Yet, this element exhausts the means used by the author to potentially glorify the hetman.
- [31] An alternative way of representing virtues of central figures of military events is suggested by two visual narratives commissioned by the Emperor Maximilian Habsburg. It needs to be noted that the Emperor was personally involved in the questions of form and content of these pieces. The first one, *Freydal*, is a tournament book made in the years 1512–1515. The second is a series of woodcuts made in the first two decades of the 16th century to accompany the literary biography of the Emperor Maximilian entitled
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Weisskunig [White King]. The work was commissioned from a group of artists including: Leonard Beck (1480–1542), Hans Burgkmair (1473–1531), Hans Schäuffelein (1480–1540) and Hans Springinklee (1490–1540). The work was commissioned to memorise Maximilian's courageous achievements in military tournaments.

- [32] Woodcuts are made according to a clear iconographic model aimed to glorify the ruler. The main protagonist, Emperor Maximilian, is given special focus, set higher and separated from the rest of figures by compositional structure, his stature, gestures and iconic details, such as plume, crown, and clothing. Sometimes the composition fails in terms of proportions and moderation – for example, looking at tournament plumes, one can easily spot who is who on the basis of their size. This kind of procedure cannot be found in *The Battle of Orsha*, which suggests that neither the author nor the founder meant to achieve personal glorification.
- [33] The collective protagonist, on the other hand, as the author of *Краткая Волынская Летопись* [Kratkaja Wolynskaja Letopis / Brief Chronicle of Volhynia] writes, "the courageous knights, those accomplished soldiers, princes, lords, and courtiers of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Ruthenia, with the aid of famous and noble knights, the great Polish lords"³⁴ was presented with striking elegance (fig. 14).



14 *The Battle of Orsha*. Fragment with hussars, tempera on oak boards, 1525–1535. The National Museum in Warsaw, inventory no. MP 2575. Photo: Piotr Ligier, Museum Photo Studio

- [34] Most scholars interpret the picture as an attempt to glamorise reality, yet taking into consideration the reality of wars in the Renaissance, one may suspect that it was the knights themselves who tried to dress sumptuously and affluently, for an owner of

³⁴ *Kratkaja Wolynskaja Letopis* [Brief Chronicle of Volhynia], in: *Полное Собрание Русских Летописей*, vol. 35, Moskwa 1980, 126.

luxurious accessories had reason to hope that he would not be killed in battle but imprisoned for ransom.

- [35] *The Battle of Orsha* is an example of a visual commemoration of an event that had both historic, as well as symbolic meaning for the founder and for the representatives of the knightly class to whom it was addressed. The narrative is formulated in the style readable for the knights, where the plausibility of the represented event is determined by the number of precisely depicted details. In Western Europe this style was universal and was increasingly often encountered both in texts, as well as in painting at least since the second half of the 14th century. At the end of the 14th century Jean Froissart, "the predecessor of war journalism", explained exactly the purpose of this method:

That the honourable enterprises, noble adventures, and deeds of arms, performed in the wars between England and France, may be properly related, and held in perpetual remembrance – to the end that brave men taking example from them may be encouraged in their well-doing, I sit down to record a history deserving great praise³⁵.

- [36] This kind of narrative was supposed to provide the representatives of the knightly class with models and motivations, to inspire their will to fight and use violence. Yet, as Jean Le Bel suggested, at the same time, for these methods to be effective, one should avoid excessive glorification of protagonists. Le Bel refers to one author who

persuaded to apply ridiculous exaggerations, described a king or a page boy as so incredibly courageous, that his real actions can be this way underrated, and the real story of his actions will not be believed and thus he will be harmed. That's why all events should be described in the most accurate and detailed manner.³⁶

- [37] Jean Le Bel insisted on presenting the opponent in an equally respectable fashion. Listing the English heroes of the Hundred Year's War included in the Prologue to the *True Chronicles* he indicates:

It does not mean that their opponents are less respectable. For, to be honest, one should consider a hero anyone who decided to take part in such brutal, dangerous and crowded battles and fight to the complete defeat with utmost dedication to the tasks performed³⁷.

- [38] *The Battle of Orsha* realises this kind of narrative programme.

- [39] This commemorative tradition became a part of Polish-Lithuanian cultural space considerably later than other elements of chivalric culture. For example, regarding its mode of narration, the choice and composition of battle material, Maciej Strykowski's chronicle is very similar to "chivalric chronicles" written by Le Bel and Froissart, and hence close to Medieval tradition. The reason for this is not so much Strykowski's

³⁵ *Chronicles of England, France and Spain and the adjoining countries from the latter part of the reign of Edward II to the coronation of Henry IV* by Sir John Froissart, V. 1, London 1862, 1.

³⁶ *Les vraies chroniques de Messire Jehan Le Bel*, red. M.L. Polain, V. I, Bruxelles 1863, 2.

³⁷ *Les vraies chroniques de Messire Jehan Le Bel*, ed. M.L. Polain, V. I, Bruxelles 1863, 2–3.

erudition, but the fact that at that time similar chivalric cultural needs determined the emergence of similar solutions. Jean Le Bel's and Jean Froissart's main historiographical method of learning the truth about events was to conduct in-depth interviews with their witnesses, and to construct out of these accounts an emotionally reserved, yet detailed narrative. Strykowski's chronicle is full of military details that can hardly be considered to be fake, yet it is even more difficult to believe that they had been documented. Nevertheless, it is in the detail where one finds the true spirit of stories told by the campfire³⁸. This fact allows for an assumption that oral tradition preserved important and detailed information on military events long after they had become history. Both writers and visual artists could make use of it.

- [40] The Battle of Orsha is a part of the tradition whose influence can be noticed in many European art works of the period. It seems that in the first three decades of the 16th century the Polish-Lithuanian noblemen, or maybe even Ruthenians, had contacts with chivalric culture. Providing here but one example, of Ruthenian origin, I would like to mention a Ruthenian version of the chivalric romance of Tristan and Isolde entitled *Повесть о Трыщане*³⁹. Written most probably in the first half of the 16th century, the text, in contrast to contemporary Western versions, is completely devoid of fantastic and hyperbolic motifs. The plot of the romance develops on the background of detailed descriptions of military violence and problems of loyalty towards the senior. Tournaments, covered extensively throughout the text, are treated not like a game or festival, but like life and death combat, resulting in the character finally meeting his end. Is it perhaps a literary allusion to the lot of Elias, hetman Konstanty Ostrogski's eldest son, who died prematurely as a result of wounds inflicted during the tournament organised as a part of Sigismund Augustus's wedding celebrations?⁴⁰
- [41] Since Polish monarchic ideology plays a small part in the composition, the founder or founders of the picture should be looked for among the Lithuanian-Ruthenian magnates, as was recently done by Maciej Monkiewicz, Andrzej Dzięciołowski and Piotr Oszczanowski. The former two indicated the family of Ostrogski, the latter the house of Radziwiłł.
- [42] In 1525, which according to dendrochronological research is theoretically the earliest possible date of the making of the artwork, both hetman Ostrogski, as well as the Radziwiłł family had good reasons to use the painting to remind the public of their triumph on the battleground of Orsha. It was the year of the escalation of the conflict between the prince Konstanty Ostrogski and the "Lithuanian separatism", as one might

³⁸ *Kronika Polska, Litewska, Żmudzka i wszystkiej Rusi Macieja Strykowskiego*, vols. I–II, Warszawa 1846.

³⁹ "Повесть о Трыщане", in: *Легенда о Тристане и Изольде*, под ред. А. Д. Михайлов, Москва 1976, 384–475.

⁴⁰ Jan Szymczak, *Pojedynki i harce, turnieje i gonitwy. Walki o życie, cześć, sławę i pieniądze w Polsce Piastów i Jagiellonów*, Warszawa 2008, 144.

term the position of the Voivode of Vilnius and the chancellor of Lithuania Albertas Goštautas. Already the previous year King Sigismund I wrote a special letter to the Chancellor forbidding him to take any aggressive action against hetman Ostrogski and settled between them so-called "zaruka" [bailment] amounting to 30 thousand piles of grosze because "мерзязька и вазнь великая ся дееть"⁴¹.

- [43] The letter that Albertas Goštautas (?) sent in 1525 to the Queen Bona had a clear message: "Contra duces Constantinum de Ostrogk et contra Radivillones" ["Against Prince Konstanty Ostrogski and against the Radziwiłł"]. The author blames the hetman for the defeat of Vedrosha in 1500 and the failure during the siege of Smolensk in the campaign of 1514⁴². As Tomasz Kempa stated,

Ostrogski promoted the close cooperation between Lithuania and Poland. As the chief leader he realised more than others the danger that Moscow posed to the Lithuanian state. [...] it made the fight over the influence in Lithuania against the advocates of the country's separatism more heated. The main figure in this group, Albertas Goštautas – in contrast to the hetman – favoured the Habsburgs and a moderate approach to Moscow. The Voivode of Vilnius tried to deprecate Ostrogski in Bona's eyes as a person of uncertain background, favouring Ruthenians and – what was allegedly following – Moscow⁴³.

- [44] Founding such a "visual document" as *The Battle of Orsha* would also mean a powerful response to the pasquil written by the Chancellor, as well as a message readable for the representatives of the nobility. From the point of view of the conflict between the Lithuanian "separatists" and the "unionists", the choice of the subject was logically justified, because equal roles in the fight against the Muscovite aggressor were played both by hetman Konstanty, as well as by the Radziwiłł family. In case of the treatment of the painting as an argument in the conflict between the Ostrogski and the Radziwiłł families with Albertas Goštautas, it is futile to identify its message with propaganda. The persuasion of the representatives of the knighthood with information codes commonly used in their culture is not the same as manipulating their minds with images and symbols.

- [45] What was important for this kind of symbolic communication was the documentary value of visual narrative. The most accurate approach to establishing communicative links between the image and the target group, namely the noblemen, was to construct a narrative on the ground of chivalric culture, which means recreating in detail the instruments, concepts and practice of military combat.

- [46] Peter Burke wrote about Renaissance Italian painting in the following way:

⁴¹ "Kłótnia, nienawiść wielka się dzieje", "Лист до воеводы виленського и до кн(я)зя гетмана ручьныи. Тымь обычаемь до виленського", in: *Lithuanian Metrica. Book of Inscription, No. 7 (1506–1539)*, Vilnius 1993, 441.

⁴² *Acta Tomiciana*, vol. VII, Kórnik 1857, 261.

⁴³ Tomasz Kempa, *Konstanty Wasyl Ostrogski*, Toruń 1997, 19.

In most cases we can do no more than conjecture what the hidden moral meaning might have been. Contemporaries (apart from the artist, the client and their intimates) will have had a similar problem. The important point is to remember that many contemporaries approached paintings with expectations of this kind⁴⁴.

- [47] Theory stating that the main moral message of the painting was supposed to bring viewers' awareness of the close cooperation between all the *gentes* of the Polish-Lithuanian state against the Muscovite invasion, and thus integrate these chivalric peoples into one political nation, is not only compatible with the direction of Konstanty Ostrogski's political ideas, but also corresponds well with the account about the Orsha victory featuring in the *Brief Chronicle of Volhynia*. This account was written before 1530, most probably supervised by the hetman himself.
- [48] The news about the cooperation between Lithuanian, Polish and Ruthenian military puts the focus on the fact that it was possible thanks to the action undertaken by the hetman who acted according to God's will and after consulting his sovereign King Sigismund I: "Konstanty Iwanowicz Ostrogski, the highest Lithuanian hetman, who aided by God and the orders of his lord king Sigismund, united the army in an intimate and tender union"⁴⁵.
- [49] Who were the real founders of the work? The Ostrogski? The Radziwiłł? Or was it perhaps their joint initiative, because they faced similar accusations? And where was the painting meant to be displayed? In one of the magnate mansions? At the royal castle of Wawel, where it would have greater influence?
- [50] These are key questions for further research on the painting. Looking at *The Battle of Orsha* in the context of chivalric culture, as an artefact of symbolic communication, requires from a contemporary scholar way more effort, yet it may bring better results than viewing the artwork within the framework of monarchical propaganda or ideology. Reading its visual narrative as a documentary epic is possible because each motif had a reflection in the real lives of the viewers of the painting. I will try to prove my point on the example of an analysis of several fragments of the work that have been most often criticised as implausible.

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Details set in the historical context and the "documentary" aspects of the painting

Seven knights and a warhorse (fig. 15)

- [51] Up to this day it has been discussed whether in the period of the Renaissance knights in battlefield were an elite using refined military technology and having rich cultural traditions, or just a useless anachronism. In a particularly suggestive fashion Johan Huizinga blamed cultivating chivalric culture for being a useless mystification, escapism, and a reliable means to escape reality (fig. 15).

⁴⁴ Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy*, Cambridge 1999, 166.

⁴⁵ *Kratkaja Wolynskaja Letopis* [Brief Chronicle of Volhynia], 126.



15 *The Battle of Orsha*. Seven knights and a warhorse. Fragment, tempera on oak boards, 1525–1535. The National Museum in Warsaw, inventory no. MP 2575. Photo: Piotr Ligier, Museum Photo Studio

- [52] Seven men in knight armours do not seem like dreamers or escapists. For sure, the winners of one of the biggest battles of Central Europe in the 16th century would not agree to being called anachronism or an instrument of an "elusive game". On the contrary, in the postures and gestures of these middle aged men, even apart from the artistic conventions of Renaissance battle painting, can be found power and grace of experienced professionals.
- [53] The equipment carried by the knights has often been questioned as inauthentic. Recent documentary and iconographic research has proved that the equipment of people and horses depicted in the picture was used in the Polish-Lithuanian army, which is confirmed by the remarks in the registers of mercenary companies [*rota*] in Poland and registers of *pospolite ruszenie* [mass-recruited forces] in Lithuania. On a woodcut presenting the victory at Orsha in Andrzej Krzycki's work from 1515 the hetman was represented on a barded horse. The arms used by knights were considered to be of highest quality, and the results of their use were terrifying. Stanisław Górski, Queen Bona's secretary, described the battle of Orsha in the following way:

Entire field was densely covered with corpses from which blood flew to the ground, bodies without heads, arms, and legs, and some of them with heads smashed with horseman's pick, broken in two, with a pierced spine and torn stomach, others with an arm separated from the body or a face destroyed with a sword, or others cut from head to waist, or pierced by a lance⁴⁶.

⁴⁶ *Acta Tomiciana*, vol. III, Kórnik 1853, 5.

[54] A battle horse is a part of this composition for a reason. It was the most expensive element in the knight's armour. Using barding for horses, parts of which are found by archaeologists from the English Channel to Kiev, is a proof of an attempt to protect this important investment, rather than display affluence. It needs to be noted that the basic cavalry war technique was the so-called mounted shock combat. The skill of the horse in such conditions was often of paramount importance not only for the victory but also for the horseman's survivor. Horse riding specialists, on the other hand, noticed that means to control a barded horse were very limited. Armour and the high saddle almost blocked any direct contact, and spurs were considered an extreme, often unsuccessful means. This is why the animal's intelligence and the psychological contact between it and the horseman were very important. For this reason, the horse was for the knight not just a means of transport, but literally a brother in arms. As Maurice Bowra noted, a representation of a "heroic horse" was an important, universal motif in the tradition of heroic epic. Equally significant was the representation of a hero who prepares for battle, with a particular depiction of his armament⁴⁷. This kind of knight was presented next to the seven knights. The presence of these motifs in the composition is yet another argument for viewing the picture as a narrative addressed to the knightly class.

Tournament armour (fig. 16)



16 *The Battle of Orsha*. Seven knights and a warhorse. Fragment, tempera on oak boards, 1525–1535. The National Museum in Warsaw, inventory no. MP 2575. Photo: Piotr Ligier, Museum Photo Studio

⁴⁷ Cecil Mourice Bowra, *Heroic poetry*, London 1952, 157–162, 188–193.

- [55] This fragment of the picture was used to question Stanisław Herbst's conclusion that "as far as the armament is concerned, the picture is not anachronistic". It has been suggested that plate armours for on foot tournament combat were not used on battlefields and were painted by the artist to "improve reality". In fact, the real improvement in the picture is actually the underestimation of casualties on Polish-Lithuanian side. This is again of symbolic meaning, as this way it was shown where God's favour was located. There are no killed soldiers on the "right" side of the battle. On the other hand, the display of elements of identification and representation of military elites, that is their armour, in an inappropriate context would lead to the disturbance of the message of the picture, because a competent viewer could find such details false and plainly ridiculous.
- [56] Why did the artist place these tournament knights in one of the visually most active places in the composition and gave them such extravagant armours? It could have been the artist's identification method and a way to distinguish particular participants of the battle associated by a contemporary viewer with participation in tournaments. Possibly, it was a direct reflection of reality. For at that time there were no clear rules about the use of battle armours. The quality of the armour was controlled, but not its type. Plate armour was designed for mounted combat. This is why it does not work for infantry. However, Tonlette decidedly states that in such armour it was impossible to mount a horse, and it was also uncomfortable for walking long distances, yet in case of positional warfare it could effectively protect thighs, pelvis and inguinal regions. Additionally, such armour had metal parts that without touching the knight's body could take all the kinetic energy of the hit.
- [57] The contrast between a battle and a tournament, so obvious for most of contemporary scholars of military problems of the period in question, did not have significant meaning for knightly elites. As Larry Silver suggests:

In the tournaments [...] early in the sixteenth century [...] came a final form of combat: the melee, or general combat in teams. This particular form of tournament combat was considered an especially vivid instance of the advantage ascribed to tournaments in general – namely, that they simulated the practice of warfare and offered peacetime exercise of military skills. Indeed, in [...] *Weisskunig*, Maximilian actually portrayed a world of politics that was practiced as warfare and a world of warfare that was practiced as if a tournament melee. In that text, foes on the battlefield are identified through their heraldic colors [...]. They are essentially without motivations, either political or personal, yet bound by rules of warfare, and they fight as kings or generals on behalf of social groups but within an almost ritually isolated field of strife, distant from those societies. In short, the tournament remains the model for this concept of warfare⁴⁸.

- [58] It is possible that placing among the infantry soldiers that can easily be identified as knights, the artist ignored the rule saying that a fighting knight has to be shown on

⁴⁸ Larry Silver, *Marketing Maximilian. The visual ideology of a Holy Roman Emperor*, Princeton 2008, 147.

horseback. At the time when the picture was painted there existed cases of promoting on foot combat among the knights. As Larry Silver states:

Another of the overlaps between tournament practice and military actions in battle was combat on foot. Traditionally shunned by noblemen, whose equestrian activities in both joust and battle seemed at odds with this kind of "pedestrian" combat, this infantry like strife was actually promoted by Maximilian. As noted above, we find the *Gefecht* as one of the four combats illustrated by Dürer among the *Freydal* woodcuts. After featuring a sequence of learning experiences in which Maximilian masters various combat weapons and shields in turn, the *Weisskunig* finally recounts [...]: "When now the young White King had learned how to fight unarmored and with *Pavesen* and *Tartschen* [shields], [...] with great earnest seriousness he learned how to fight in armor, at first on foot with the pike and the halberd [...]."⁴⁹

The rota of barded horses (fig. 17)



17 *The Battle of Orsha. Rota of barded horses. Fragment, tempera on oak boards, 1525–1535. The National Museum in Warsaw, inventory no. MP 2575. Photo: Piotr Ligier, Museum Photo Studio*

[59] The way lancers are presented – grouped in a square, in the centre of composition – has raised doubts of some scholars because of the "parade, tournament" like armours, as well as because of the barded horses. Mieczysław Gębarowicz stated that the latter "do not seem to have been widely used in Poland"⁵⁰. This statement is generally right, yet it must be added that mount combat in full horse armour at the turn of the 15th and 16th century was not a popular event in other European countries either, with the exception of the highest social elites, for example the court of Emperor Maximilian. Otherwise, the tradition of barding warhorses has been known since the Roman period⁵¹. The so-called barding was a specialist and expensive war equipment, useful only in specific geographic

⁴⁹ Silver, *Marketing Maximilian*, 157–158.

⁵⁰ Gębarowicz, *Początki malarstwa historycznego w Polsce*, 12.

conditions and for special tactical purposes. They were most effective in ramming and mounted shock combat, and this type of combat was rarely used in Renaissance battlefield because favourable circumstances occurred rarely.

- [60] In Polish descriptions of mercenary *rota* of the 15th and 16th century horse armour is mentioned only occasionally, yet one document mentions a certain combat formation, where barding was used on purpose and systematically. The register of Krzysztof Kotwicz's unit from the beginning of the 16th century mentions

as much as 34 horses with their bodies covered. In 33 cases these are bardings, among which 4 were defined as *ladra curta*, that is shorter or incomplete, and in one case *roskop* or crownpiece was mentioned. [Similarly equipped horses can be found in Bernard van Orley's tapestries – V.H.] Curiously, among these 34 horses, constituting one third of the overall number of horses in Kotwicz's *rota*, as much as 29 barded horses were defined as belonging to archers⁵².

- [61] According to royal accounts, since 29 April 1514 Janusz Świerczowski received for the Smolensk campaign, during which the battle of Orsha took place, 10 zloty per horse, in total 300 zloty for a *rota* of 30 horses, while all other rittmeisters received 4 zloty per horse⁵³. The question is then whether royal investment was to equip a specialised *rota* – in this case of lancers – similar to Kotwicz's unit, and perhaps it was represented in the picture in its entirety because of its representative character. A possible image of the leader is to be found next to the lancers. Although the number of knights in the picture exceeds the number given in the records, it was not uncommon for rittmeisters to add armed units (*poczet*) at their own expense.

- [62] What is more, it needs to be noted that in contrast to a commonly shared academic opinion, in the first decades of the 16th century the distinction between combat armour and tournament armour was not so clear. It was related directly to stereotypes present among representatives of knightly class, although at that time special tournament armours were already being produced. As Larry Silver states:

For Maximilian, military victory overlaps with tournament victory. This attitude carried over in terms of arms and weapons, which were produced so avidly for Maximilian and often employed interchangeably between tournament field and battlefield⁵⁴.

- [63] A possible conclusion can be that not all typical features of battle reality were accurately represented because a realisation of such a task with the use of painting techniques was not possible at the time, as it is not possible nowadays. Nevertheless, all that was included in the picture had its equivalents in real life.

⁵¹ Claude Blair, *European Armour*, London 1958, 184; Michał Gradowski and Zdzisław Żygulski jun., *Słownik uzbrojenia historycznego*, Warszawa 2000, 150.

⁵² *Uzbrojenie w Polsce średniowiecznej 1450–1500*, red. A. Nowakowski, Toruń 2003, 113.

⁵³ *Lithuanian Metrica. Book of Inscription, No. 7 (1506–1539)*, 642.

⁵⁴ Silver, *Marketing Maximilian*, 153.

Conclusion

- [64] The painting in question seems documentary in details, yet symbolic in content and form, and communication with the viewer. Its peculiar nature still provokes discussions and leads to formulations of extremely different opinions. However, it offers a possibility of reading it as a documentary epic. We need to remember that fashion for hyper-critique comes and goes, and historical sources remain. This is why placing them in stiff classification frameworks based on *a priori* modern terms such as "propaganda" or "ideology" blurs their potential.
- [65] *The Battle of Orsha* is an example of a purposeful representation of chivalric tradition and of the expansion of its scope on representatives of other military and elite cultures, such as the Lithuanian Tartars or Balkan mercenaries, the hussars. Iconographic programme seems to be a conscious attempt to link Lithuanian, Polish and Ruthenian elites into one new nobility-based "nation". This means of symbolic communication not so much proposes some kind of ideology, but it epically and suggestively represents political and cultural processes at work in the Polish-Lithuanian-Ruthenian nobility circles. Numerous iconographic analogies with Western European art, so eagerly searched for by scholars in the details of the painting for the last 60 years, suggest that these processes were closely linked with cultural phenomena present all around Europe.

Translated by Karolina Kolenda

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