



Strategies of Early Modern Royal Representation. Sigismund II Augustus and His Public Image in 1520–1548

In 1566, in the introduction to *Dworzanin polski*, Łukasz Górnicki – the royal secretary, librarian, and one of the brightest humanists of sixteenth-century Poland – praised Sigismund II Augustus in the following manner:

Szczęściu to Waszej Krolewskiej Miłości przyczyć się musi, Najaśniejszy, a Miłościwy Krolu, iż za żadnego Polskiego Krola tak wiele uczonych ludzi w Polsce nie było, jako za panowania W. K. M., a to zasię nie od szczęścia jest, ale właśnie z ręku twych krolewskich, iż ma Polska tyle ksiąg swoim językiem, ile się ich pirwej nigdy nie najdowało. [...] Przeto wiele powinna Polska W. K. M. za tę jaśnie dobrotliwą chęć ku sobie.¹

This encomium was a result of decades-long activities and continuous image-building of King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania Sigismund II Augustus (1520–1572), a prominent representative of the Renaissance royal cohort in East-Central Europe in the sixteenth century, as well as of similar efforts made to project a particular image of his court. Thanks to his persistent support of educational and artistic endeavours, Sigismund Augustus may fairly be compared with his Renaissance contemporaries: Matthias Corvinus (Hungary), Francis I (France), Henry VIII and Elizabeth I (England), Ferdinand I (Holy Roman Empire), and Philip II (Spain). At the same time, the image of the last Jagiellon as an educated and successful king had been constructed for a long time to fit the expectations of the Polish-Lithuanian nobility of the

¹ Ł. Górnicki, *Dworzanin polski*, Tower Press, Gdańsk 2000, p. 4. This quotation became a part of the dedication in my Master's thesis: O. Rudenko, *The Classical Reception, Royal Image and Strengthening the King's Power in Early Modern Poland (1520–1572)*, Kraków–Glasgow–Tartu 2020 thanks to my supervisor Prof. Jakub Niedźwiedz (Jagiellonian University). I would like to thank him once again for introducing to me the strikingly interesting field of Renaissance Polish literature and art. This article derives from my Master's research findings. My research and final changes to this article would not be possible without the bravery of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, volunteers, doctors, and everyone who supports Ukraine today.

era and to be in line with the early modern humanist discourses about an ideal ruler.

The question of who and how was involved in the process of shaping the royal image constitutes the key part of this article. To elaborate further, I focus on the sixteenth-century strategies of image construction and the key actors involved in it. The strategies of royal representation are hereby understood as conventional practices of linguistic, artistic, cultural, depictional, and other nature that the main agents deliberately followed with a purpose to shape – what one may call using the anachronic term ‘public’ – the image of the ruler (or the heir, as it was in the case of Sigismund II for a significant period). The image of Sigismund Augustus as an erudite ruler corresponded to the royal and humanist requirements of the era and was deliberately constructed since his childhood. This activity continued throughout his life and reign. Various actors involved in the building of the royal image contributed to different dimensions of Sigismund Augustus’ representation, yet it does not imply that that his image (perceived in a broad sense) was completely erratic. The topic touches upon the issues of royal propaganda in the sixteenth century, although it is worth underlining that royal representation, albeit essential, is merely one of many elements of this broader phenomenon, which is why these terms can be distinguished from one another.

This article is not intended as a complete overview that encompasses the entirety of strategies of creating and promoting royal authority in early modern Poland-Lithuania. Instead, it presents several approaches in the royal representation of the last Jagiellon before his sole accession to the thrones (thus focusing on 1520–1548). These examples may serve as a starting point for the research on early modern royal imagology in Poland-Lithuania. For this purpose, I draw on information from relevant chronicles and several poetic and visual examples which shaped the public image of young Sigismund.

The selection of the period is deliberate. Even if Sigismund II continued to count the dates of his reign since 1529–1530, it was after 1544 (beginning of his actual reign in Lithuania) and 1548 (death of Sigismund the Old) when the influence of his mother Bona Sforza began to decline gradually, enabling Augustus and his court to apply new, distinct strategies of royal representation.² An analysis of the last Jagiellon’s collection of arrases is also omitted consciously.³

² Mentions about Bona Sforza’s impact are present in Sigismund Augustus’ correspondence with Mikołaj ‘the Black’ Radziwiłł. See *Listy oryginalne Zygmunta Augusta do Mikołaja Radziwiłła Czarnego*, ed. S. Lachowicz, Drukiem T. Glücksberga, Wilno 1842, <https://www.sbc.org.pl/dlibra/show-content/publication/edition/10192?id=10192>, Accessed: 20.11.2021. I found the reference to this correspondence in K. Kosior, *Becoming a Queen in Early Modern Europe: East and West*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2019, p. 171.

³ The first tapestries arrived right before Sigismund Augustus’ third wedding in 1553, hence their inclusion in my article might be reasonably debated since they did not shape his public self-representation before 1548.

At the same time, one should acknowledge the role of arras for the sixteenth-century royal prestige, especially since Sigismund's "extensive collection of animal tapestries may have been conceived as an adaptable, monumental emblemata" and since the tapestry cycle owned by Sigismund Augustus later became a model for other European rulers and was reproduced at their request.⁴

The royal representation and image construction that may be substituted with the term 'prestige building' became particularly significant in the early modern era, not least because of developed practices of information dissemination (namely print) and the rising popularity of 'specula principum' ('mirrors of the princes').⁵ One of such texts by Stanisław Orzechowski, *Fidelis subditus sive de institutione regia ad Sigismundum Augustum libri duo* (with two variants dating back to 1543 and 1548), was dedicated to Sigismund Augustus and was widely circulated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁶ The text cited at the beginning of this article, *Dworzanin polski*, was a paraphrase of Baldassare Castiglione's *Il cortegiano* (1528). Such texts were renowned across Europe and significantly influenced the perception of the rulers and their governance.⁷

Research on Renaissance royal representation in the public sphere has flourished during the last decades.⁸ One of the notable books is Kevin Sharpe's work on the sixteenth-century Tudor monarchy which encompasses diverse methods of legitimising and strengthening the Tudors' authority in early

⁴ C. Niekrasz, *Woven Theaters of Nature: Flemish Tapestry and Natural History, 1550–1600*, Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, Evanston 2007, pp. 164–169. For an overview of Sigismund Augustus' arras see: M. Hennel-Bernasikowa and M. Piwocka, *Katalog arrasów króla Zygmunta Augusta*, Zamek Królewski na Wawelu, Kraków 2017.

⁵ I distinguish these two terms in the following manner: image construction describes the processes of establishing and promoting specific discourses and representations of a person. Royal representation could refer both to the result of this construction (bearing in mind that royal representation is not a stable value but can fluctuate depending on current political, military, or other needs) and to a particular case, for instance in a treatise, poem, set of paintings or tapestries, or speeches at the Sejm. My approach to royal representation is influenced by the term coined by Stephen Greenblatt in 1980 that became widely accepted in historical scholarship on the subject. See the recent edition: S. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2005.

⁶ The name may be translated as 'Wierny poddany czyli o stanie królewskim Zygmuntovi Augustowi dwie księgi' [Loyal Subject, or Two Books on the Royal Status to Sigismund Augustus]. The treatise was first printed in Latin in 1584 and published in Polish in 1606 as S. Orzechowski, *Fidelis subditus albo O stanie królewskim przekładania ks. Jana Januszowskiego, archidiakona sądeckiego*, Kraków 1606. The analysis and text may be found in B. Ulanowski, *Sześć broszur politycznych z XVI i początku XVII stulecia*, ed. S. Kutrzeba, Nakładem PAU, Kraków 1921.

⁷ L.T. Darling, *Mirrors for Princes in Europe and the Middle East. A Case of Historiographical Incommensurability*, in: *East Meets West in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, ed. A. Classen, De Gruyter, Berlin–Boston 2013, p. 223.

⁸ See, for instance, a recent article: S. Trevisan, *Genealogy and Royal Representation: Edmund Brudenell's Pedigree Roll for Elizabeth I (1558–60)*, "Huntington Library Quarterly" 2018, vol. 81, no. 2, pp. 257–275.

modern England.⁹ Its principal feature is the inclusion of diverse elements of public life in the sixteenth century, including religious ceremonies, visual practices, official documents, and popular texts. Bearing in mind the distinctions and similarities between political thought and royal authority in early modern England and Poland-Lithuania, it seems reasonable to assume that some identical practices were in use by other European monarchs.¹⁰ Zenon Piech has published a study in which he assembles three notable elements of the Jagiellonian visual representation: coins, stamps, and coats of arms.¹¹ However, our understanding of the topic would benefit from adding some other dimensions of royal authority and its functioning in the public space. One of such recent studies is Mieczysław Morka's work in which he describes the approaches of Sigismund the Old's court to art in the context of the political and military circumstances of the era. Morka also refers to the early examples of Augustus' representation, elucidating how those artistic themes impacted his future representation.¹² Thus, I analyse the artistic practices used for Sigismund Augustus' representation, and I outline possible approaches and sources for such a study in this essay.

One may deduce several notable characteristics of Sigismund II as the King and the Grand Duke as of 1566, the year in which Górnicki published his treatise: he was a well-educated bibliophile and a patron of arts, humanists, and poetry. How had that representation been shaped in his early years and by whom? Cognisant of the fact that such research would require the inclusion of a vast number of sources, I delineate merely some features of the early representation of Sigismund II Augustus. The overview of strategies applied for the construction of Sigismund's image in his early years will inevitably raise the question of the actors. Hence, in addition to systematising some of the key strategies, I discuss and describe the agents for whom these practices were understandable.

The first strategy that was applied from the very beginning of Sigismund's life were his name and titles. The interchangeable titles depended on the royal chancellery. However, chronicles are likewise relevant for investigating the topic. Several approaches can be distinguished when it comes to the purpose

⁹ K. Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy. Authority and Image in Sixteenth-century England*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2009.

¹⁰ See pioneering works by Tomasz Gromelski and a larger edited volume by Richard Unger and Jakub Basista. T. Gromelski, *Classical Models in Early Modern Poland-Lithuania*, in: *Ancient Models in the Early Modern Republican Imagination*, ed. W. Velema, A. Weststeijn, Brill, Leiden 2017, pp. 285–305; R. Unger, J. Basista (eds.), *Britain and Poland-Lithuania. Contact and Comparison from the Middle Ages to 1795*, Brill, Leiden 2008.

¹¹ Z. Piech, *Monety, pieczęcie i herby w systemie symboli władzy Jagiellonów*, Wydawnictwo DiG, Warszawa 2003.

¹² M. Morka, *Sztuka dworu Zygmunta I Starego. Treści polityczne i propagandowe*, Argraf, Warszawa 2006.

served by the names selected for the royal heir: these names were chosen to emphasise the connection with his father, Sigismund the Old, to commemorate his month of birth as a good omen, or to prophesise him a future as bright as the one enjoyed by the Roman princeps Octavianus Augustus.¹³ Marcin Bielski's chronicle from 1551 mentioned two versions of the origins of his name, where Bielski wrote about the birth of Sigismund II and the choice of the name based on the month:

ktoremu imie dano Zygmunt wtory, a Cesarskie przydano Augustus od miesąca [...] Cesarz Oktawian tego miesiąca od Senatu Rzymkiego był na Cesarstwo przełożon [...] wykładają drudzy Augustus ab auguxando [...] drudzy też wykładają Augustus ab augmentando, iż powinien Rzecz Pospolitą mnożyć każdy Monarcha.¹⁴

The chronicles by Maciej Strykowski (1582) and Joachim Bielski (1597) omitted the description of the process of choosing the name for Sigismund II in 1520. However, the use of the name 'Augustus' (called in the abovementioned quote "imie Cesarskie," that is an imperial name) and its possible function as rivalling the Habsburgs' use of the title of 'emperors' in early modern Europe provides some hints as to the purpose of its selection.¹⁵ Justus Ludwik Decius swiftly inserted this name and a dedicated poem by Philipp Gundelius in his *De Sigismundi regis temporibus liber III*, printed in Kraków in 1521 with a portrait of Sigismund Augustus (Fig. 1).¹⁶ The circulation of new images of Sigismund Augustus continued in the 1550s and the 1560s, when several portraits were printed in various works, yet the seminal one appeared just a year after his birth.¹⁷

Another feature of the early functioning of Augustus' image in public life was his title, especially after the elections and anointment in 1529–1530.¹⁸ Roman imperial titles were frequently used within the language of Renaissance rhetoric.¹⁹ Hence, the use of the second name 'Augustus' could also be considered as falling in line with this practice. During the 1520s–1530s, the Polish and

¹³ S. Cynarski, *Zygmunt August*, Ossolineum, Wrocław 2004, p. 19; M. Morka, *Sztuka dworu*, p. 112; C. Niekrasz, op. cit., p. 119; J. Pokora, *Nihil sine causa. Satyry na arrasach wawelskich*, "Biuletyn Historii Sztuki" 2017, no. 4, p. 696.

¹⁴ M. Bielski, *Kronika wszystkiego świata*, Helena Unglerowa, Kraków 1551, ff. 286v, 286r, <https://jbc.bj.uj.edu.pl/dlibra/doccontent?id=230624>, Accessed: 20.11.2021.

¹⁵ See for this M. Morka, *Sztuka dworu*, p. 92. His footnote on p. 112 points to J. Nowak-Dłużewski, *Okolicznościowa poezja polityczna w Polsce. Czasy zygmontowskie*, Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, Warszawa 1966, pp. 354–355.

¹⁶ J. Ruszczyćówna, *Nieznane portrety ostatnich Jagiellonów*, "Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie" 1976, vol. 20, pp. 7–9.

¹⁷ See *ibidem*, pp. 5–119. Most portraits of Sigismund Augustus date back to the 1550s–1560s.

¹⁸ The pivotal role in the symbolism of the titles was played by Sigismund I. Some representations of Sigismund Augustus followed the patterns of representation of Sigismund the Old. For several examples see M. Morka, *Sztuka dworu*, pp. 143, 146, 258–260.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 273.