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STUDIES ON THE JAGELLONIAN AND THE POLISH-LITHUANIAN COMMONWEALTH ARTILLERY (A SIDE NOTE ON MIKOLA VOLKAY'S *ARTYLERYA NASVISHSKAGA ZAMKA*)

Abstract: The article described the history of the Nieśwież Castle artillery (on a side note of Mikola Volkay's *Artylerya Nasvishskaga zamka* / *Артылерыя Нясвіжскага замка*). It was the repertory of cannons founded by numerous generations of Radziwiłł house since the first half of the 16th century. The author of the reviewed thesis presents another transformations of the Nieśwież artillery and the main figures of Radziwiłł house, who took part in creation of the repertory, in competitive and comprehensive way. It is worth stressing that this type of research could appreciate being an analysis of not only the weapon's technical parameters, but also the cultural context, in which the weapon existed. It is especially important in case of expensive things, which were not only useable, but also glamorous.


Keywords: early modern history of warfare, history of artillery, Radziwills, Nieśwież Castle

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Published in 2015, Mikola Volkay's book dedicated to the Nieśwież Castle artillery responds to need to develop research into this topic. This subject has existed in Polish studies for a long time and was used especially by Tadeusz Marian Nowak. It is almost impossible to cite all his theses on this matter. However, this investigator operated mainly on the basis of written sources - records, accounts and artillery treatises. The advantage of Volkay's thesis that the author has based his research on a wide repertory of material from that period. He studied many cannon barrels preserved in Belarusian, Russian, German, Polish and Swedish museums. This publication is not large (188 pages), but consists of 11 substantive sections.

In the introduction the author notes reasonably that military technology, and especially its development, was one of the reasons for the advance of civilization. The best example of this impact was the invention of gunpowder and firearms. Easily understood, this breakthrough is connected with the so-called Military Revolution which classically refers to dynamic qualitative and quantitative changes in European armies during the 16th-18th centuries.¹ Apart from the details of this complex and still growing theory, it should be noted that the appearance of firearms in battlefields was – in the opinion of this theory's creators and followers – such a significant transition that it led to broad repercussions and reactions in national structures. While not denying these assertions, one should remember that such long-range

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¹ Parker 1972; Parker 1976, 195-214; Duffy 1980; Black 1991; Eltis 1995; Rogers 1995; Parker 1996; Knox and Murray 2001; Raymond 2007; Maroń 2011; Agoston 2014.

changes started with first, generally lowly attempts, and later took on a larger scale. Only the wealthiest could afford to make and keep artillery. Necessarily, only sovereigns or alternatively very well-endowed noble houses come into the picture. Suffice it to mention the investment of Emperor Maximilian I Habsburg² or King Sigismund II Augustus.³ One can venture a guess that commissioning and storing other specimens of cannons was the passion of both of those sovereigns. However, these are the exceptional and widely known cases.

The Nieśwież Castle artillery studied by Volkay is an excellent example of commissioning and investment by a magnate house. The Nieśwież Castle itself is mentioned here as an *exemplum* of course, because it was the property of at first of three, and later two bloodlines of the House of Radziwiłł,⁴ and was only one of a few similar fortress at least (parenthetically, it is worth stressing that the birth of those architectonic defensive plans is considered to be another sign of the Military Revolution).⁵ *Nota bene* neither was Nieśwież Castle the only fortress built according to modern bastion plans, nor was the Nieśwież Castle artillery the only repertory of cannons belonging to this house. Therefore, the elucidation of the Radziwiłłs' private investments through the prism of Nieśwież Castle serves only – as one should assume – as an introduction to further research. The matching touchstone of the scale of this family's investment seems to be numerous preserved contemporary records and inventories (nowadays stored in *Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych* in the so-called *Archiwum Warszawskie Radziwiłłów*).

The first and the second sections are connected with the genesis and popularisation of artillery in Europe and the birth of the Radziwiłłs' artillery (section I: pp. 13-24, section 2: pp. 25-32). Here we have a general treatment of the question. The author sets out the most important moments in the history of the beginnings of artillery in Central and Eastern Europe. He also mentions the use of artillery in battles fought by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland with neighbouring countries, including conflicts with the Teutonic Knights and the Grand Duchy of Moscow. He devotes a great deal of attention to describing preserved records and illustrations from the archives. It is understandable that because of a lack of detailed research it is hard to make a draw definitive conclusions. However, it is worth stressing that one essential element the Author's thesis his stress not only on records as the part of military technology itself, but also its ornaments in

the broad sense. It is important because one should notice that a desire to individualise every piece followed costly investment. Then, other barrels were named and inscribed with appropriate inscriptions (nicknames, the owners' names) and coats of arms. The enrichment of the thesis with epigraphical evidence in the broad sense should be treated as an extra value of this publication, to which in shall return later.

Volkay claims that the birth of the power of the House of Radziwiłł led to the birth of its artillery repertory, including Nieśwież Castle, and their collections in the broad sense (not only of arms) which differentiated Nieśwież Castle and other Radziwiłł mansions, for a few centuries (p. 30). It is a pity this theme is not widely presented, especially when it has been known in the literature for a long time. Zdzisław Żygulski Jr. wrote that “[...] apart from the Jagiellonian armoury, it was the wealthiest one in the Republic (of Poland-Lithuania) in the Renaissance. Certainly it rose as a product of the collectors' rivalry with the king. Not without importance was also a similar rivalry with Duke Albert of Prussia, the excellent military specialist”.⁶ Personally I think the reason for collecting cannons was not only the Radziwiłłs' easy financial ability to buy proper service which was the result of their growing standing among the Polish and Lithuanian nobility (especially during the reign of Sigismund II Augustus). Equally important, if not even more important, was the factor of willingness. The Radziwiłłs had both resources and a desire to use them in a specific way. Therefore, it proclaims that they were cognisant of their own standing and – as Żygulski has said – downright pursued rivalry with the sovereign.

Obviously one can ask whether there was a real military need to extend the artillery repertory in Nieśwież Castle and other Radziwiłł dwellings. Volkay stresses that there was no artillery support in Nieśwież Castle at length, they were employed pro tem in real need. That fact allows us to treat this artillery as a collection, used only sometimes for a military purpose, rather than as a typical armoury whose resources are in regular use.

Another section is dedicated to the formation of the Nieśwież Castle artillery (pp. 35-58). Here the author fairly explores the key function of Mikołaj Krzysztof Radziwiłł (1549-1616) dubbed “Sierotka” (“the Orphan”). He was the one, under whose guidance Nieśwież Castle became the family's central dwelling and its equipment began to adopt an extraordinary nature. Undoubtedly his acts were aimed at making Nieśwież Castle the family seat not only as a palace-stronghold but also as a central point, whose

² See *Zeugbuch*.

³ Jaworski 2015, 139-163.

⁴ Górzyński et al. 1996, 3-43.

⁵ Frost 1993, 26-27; Frost 2002, 295.

⁶ Żygulski jun. 1982, 202.

importance and splendour should overshadow the family's other mansions. This case confirms that the nature of this kind of investment was absolutely contingent on will. Following Andrzej Pośpiech, one may call it a peculiar layout of wealth, aimed at underlining the extraordinary standing of persons or the family in terms "[...] which represent social rank [...]".⁷

The ensemble of sources employed by the Author support this interpretation, because they are mainly preserved inventories (not necessarily posthumously) and three-dimensional monuments and relics. It is an extra advantage of this publication; the written sources, that is inventories and preserved items (the cannon barrels), which appear in inventories, are confronted there. They are also accompanied by numerous contemporary drawings and high value colour illustrations. The advantage of this is that they present not only profiles of known cannon barrels, but also their details and inscriptions. This theme continues in the next section (*The castle artillery in the 17th century*; pp. 59-72). There, apart from the information about the 17th century, there is information from the 18th century too. A section connected with artillery support, security of fixture and cannon storage complements this a part of the thesis (pp. 75-88).

The further part of the thesis concerns the interrelation of artillery and the fortification plan of Nieśwież Castle (pp. 89-102). There is the Author's analysis of the fortification plan and the range of its artillery defence. The narration is complemented with many photographs of the current condition of the bastion siegeworks. It is quite a slender part of the publication, based on three letters directed to the one of the Radziwiłłs (one of the letters dates back to 1660, the two remaining ones date to 1702). It is a pity that the Author did not exploit to a larger extent the findings of Tadeusz Bernatowicz, whose publication *Monumenta...* is known by Volkay, who quotes it in the first section.⁸ Basing himself on the preserved inventories of Nieśwież Castle buildings, which are peculiar architectonic inventories of the age, Bernatowicz attempted to reconstruct the stages of the extension of Nieśwież Castle. The martial theme is continued in the section on *The stronghold in the Northern Wars* (pp. 103-110). This chapter presents the fate of the castle while the Swedes and Muscovites ravaged the lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania between 1770 and 1721. It is worth stressing that the Author calls this historical state "our lands" in an interesting way of connoting the heritage of national traditions (in this case by the Belarus).

The restoration of family dwelling's greatness came during the stewardship of Michał Kazimierz Radziwiłł

(1702-1762) dubbed "Rybeńko" ("the Little Fish"). Volkay outlines those questions and some very interesting issues of cannon production, including the closely presented point of treating prepared casts in two further sections (pp. 111-122 and 123-136). It is worth underlining the insertion of appropriate illustrations. They show for example the treatment of the cannon-barrel's prototype, the generation technology of which is presented by the Author in detail. The reproduced cards concerning smelting furnaces and so-called *świdrownie* which were the mills powering the drill bits used to the finish boring of the barrel and shaping it are illustrated by excellent bore plans (pp. 130-131). These parts of the publication are based on reliable archival research. The section relating to the reforms introduced by Karol Stanisław Radziwiłł (1734-1790) dubbed "Panie Kochanku" is somewhat a complement of the part dedicated to the history of "the first" residence, the artillery repertory and the room where the cannons were cast. Moreover, it is one of the best sections based on source materials (pp. 137-156).

The section closing the publication is dedicated to fate of the Nieśwież Castle cannons in the 19th and 20th centuries. The subject and the lots of the remaining items do not make one feel hopeful. The extraordinary collection was completely neglected at first and finally sold. Between 1926 and 1927 Prince Albrecht Radziwiłł initiated the sale of the Radziwiłłs' repertories, including many weapons. This initiative was the last step in the existence of the Nieśwież Castle collection. Of course the most of several elements of the collection survived in various museums or private repertories, but the Nieśwież Castle Collection as a unit existed no longer. As Mariusz Cieśla wrote: "[...] the export of so many high-grade armament monuments is veiled in mystery. Any institution of the Second Polish Republic made a move in this case. Even the professional journal "Broń i Barwa" ("Weapons and Colours") did not take the floor on the subject of the forfeiture of the Nieśwież Castle armoury's exhibits".⁹ The dissipation of the numerous exhibits marked the end of the Nieśwież Castle Armoury in its original form. This publication is complemented by thirteen tables connected with the cannons made in Nieśwież Castle and a short glossary of professional terms.

Conclusions

Volkay's thesis concerns military material culture as a research subject. It is quite understandable that for this reason alone so few investigator are interested in those subjects. Hence this publication can be treated as

⁷ Pośpiech 1992, 107.

⁸ Bernatowicz 1998.

⁹ Cieśla 2013, 11.

a vehicle for getting to know the history of the artillery in the Jagiellonian lands and in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the broader sense. It can even lead on to further studies of the subject. The Author paid relatively little attention to the fate of the Nieśwież Castle artillery in the 17th century, what additionally confirms the lack of detailed studies of the topic. *De facto* the fate of the artillery only seems to have been researched in depth, while the considerable repertory of extant sources (contemporary texts, objects) induces one to start research.

Volkay took on the difficult task of gathering and interpreting materials dissipated as the Nieśwież Castle collection in museums and archives. However, clearly the basis of the written record remains Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych (AGAD) in Warsaw. Remaining materials are important, but only complement the AGAD holdings. It is worth stressing that this repertory itself is in a state of confusion and requires the attention of an experienced researcher. To sum up, it could be said that Volkay's thesis represents his part in exploring not only the subject itself but also the relevant museum and archive repertories.

Apart from this, I have an impression that some other questions could have been the part of the main analysis. Admittedly, they were touched upon, but not stressed sufficiently. In my opinion the postulate of researching at once not only the transitions clearly typologically-formal of another cannon barrels, but also their meaning. They are – as I said before – in the lump preserved in ornamentation. The epigraphic monuments of all kinds give specific information, it is a question of diagnosis if they are confined to identification of the owner or the barrel's contractor or if they have a broader sense. The example of this kind of measure in the other field is Lech Marek's recently published thesis.¹⁰

One can make a hypothesis that in the broad context arms, including the Nieśwież Castle cannons, for the reason of price alone, were items of prestige. In this particular case they gave prestige to the House of Radziwiłł and their decoration showed a specific ideological programme. It can be compared to the programme contained in royal inscriptions. I would also highlight the precise inventorization of artillery repertories. What the Author treats in his coverage as a direct source (inventories) after all is itself an individual group of written sources. The fact that the owners knew the meaning of having cannons is not surprising, but the fact that they had a need to still set it down in consecutive inventories is a symptom of conscious cultivation of tradition and the inner cohesiveness of the house, based on appealing

to the past records of the collection and the necessity of continuing this tradition.

Here use of the term "semiofor" coined by Krzysztof Pomian, is suggested. He underlined its dualism: "as dual items, both physical and semiotic, semiofors could be examined in the two guise: material and semantic [...]".¹¹ I do not think that the cannons written down in the inventories could be treated as semiofors. They were completely utilitarian. Not necessarily military or representative, lying in the armoury they filled diverse roles: from items of prestige and wealth, through the different steps of wear, to being dinosaurs forgotten and languishing in the armoury. Only by setting them down, that is, fortifying them with a description and upgrading them to the state of semiofor, can we read them nowadays. What is more, in my opinion the second ground offers far broader chances to interpret them.

The artillery "passion" on the threshold of modernity did not pass the two last Jagiellons by, as Volkay noted many times. Especially Sigismund II Augustus' interest in this field was widely known. After all, the artillery was mostly his property, and a well-guarded object of pride.¹² As was said before, most likely the Radziwiłłs collected cannons in imitation of the sovereign. In this way they demonstrated their wealth and thought about the future. Artillery is not only weapons that are handy to fight with and defend palaces/castles. The technical innovation was expensive and often also useless, for this reason alone that the owners were afraid of forfeiture or destruction. Nevertheless, other cannons were bought or had to cast. Still, all this was following in the sovereign's footsteps.¹³ Cannons were not only a costly novelty, but also in a special way they upgraded the house on the higher steps of the social ladder.

However this repetition could be not only the fall-out of a simple wish to improve the family's standing in the noble milieu. It might even have been a desire to effect a partial invasion of the immanent sacrosanctity of the sovereign's authority. The Radziwiłłs, by collecting artillery, gave evidence that their imitative action was some kind of adulation. It was the attitude of the family towards the centre meaning as „concentrated loci of serious acts; they consists in the point or points in a society where its leading ideas come together with its leading institutions to create an arena in which the events that most vitally affect its members' lives take place.¹⁴ Following this lead: at the political centre of any complexly organized society "[...] there is both a governing elite and a set of symbolic forms expressing the fact that

¹⁰ Marek 2017, *passim*.

¹¹ Pomian 2006, 101.

¹² Jaworski 2015.

¹³ Geertz 1983, 123; Althoff 2011, 11.

¹⁴ Geertz 1983, 122-123.

it is truth governing”.¹⁵ By extension, copying the forms of ownership and the material content of the state of property could be treated as an attempt to enter into the central sphere not only by simple repetition. The main aim was to enter into the central symbolic sphere, according to the rule: who wields at least partial ideological forms, wields

at least partial power. In fact this *quasi* power only partially depended on symbolic forms, practically its symptoms were appurtenances (in Geertz’s sense that they are so-called paraphernalia of affiliation). In my opinion, the Radziwiłłs’ armoury with the repertory of cannons constitutes such an appurtenance.

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