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“The bow and archery in the culture of the nobility of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth”
- doctoral dissertation

Abstract

Given the obvious changes that occurred in the social mentality from the 16th and 17th centuries to the present day, the main goal of this dissertation is to describe the importance of weapons in the Middle Ages and the early modern period, treated not only as a combat tool but, above all, as everyday objects, present in the public and private spaces of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth nobility. The main and positively verified question is whether the bow and its accessories were used by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth nobility outside of combat, and if so, under what circumstances, for what purpose, and with what effect on the customs and habits of a specific social group. By focusing on the perspective of a single element of weaponry, this dissertation expands knowledge on the art of war in the Middle Ages and early modern period, as well as the customs and mentality of the nobility, while simultaneously proposing a perspective on the historical study of weaponry that differs from existing schools of weaponry studies.

To achieve these goals, the dissertation employs a diverse methodology. The primary methods employed include lexical analysis, iconographic research, examination of artifacts in museum collections, geographical analysis, comparative analysis, and the silence of sources. It should be emphasized that the dissertation also employs a quasi-experimental approach, as some phenomena are explained in part based on the author's own archery experience.

From examining written and iconographic sources, some very interesting conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, archery in medieval Poland, and later in the First Polish Republic, was a widespread phenomenon, with both the nobility and, in certain periods, peasants possessing archery skills. The use of the bow in Polish lands can be divided into four unequal periods, and especially in the first (the Middle Ages), the bow was one of the most important elements of the armament of Polish warriors and knights. The bow was a universal weapon with specific advantages, which have been described in considerable detail, and which stemmed in part from the described diversity of equipment used. Outside of battle, the nobility of the First Polish Republic treated the described weapon and its accessories as an element of attire, a distinction of rank and dignity, a mark of wealth, or even a treasure, a valuable gift, or a bequest. In the lives of some nobility, the bow was present from childhood to death, playing a role in physical education, upbringing, hunting, recreation, and even criminal activities. Archery equipment is also present in Polish heraldry and has even acquired specific symbolic meanings, detectable through analysis of cultural texts. In the early modern period, it constituted an important component of the nobility's material culture for over 200 years, after which its role rapidly declined, and to this day it remains largely forgotten and devalued.