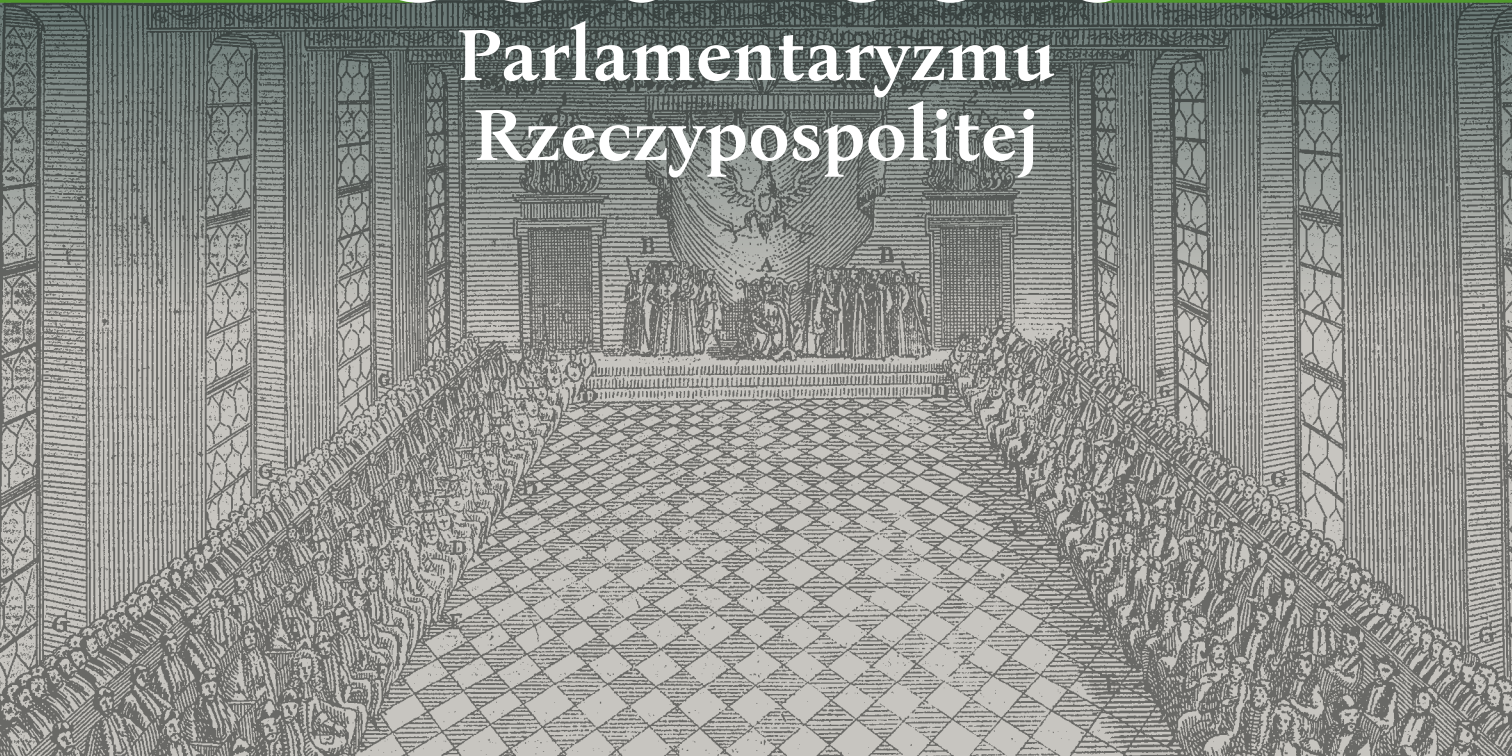




550-lecie

Parlamentaryzmu  
Rzeczypospolitej



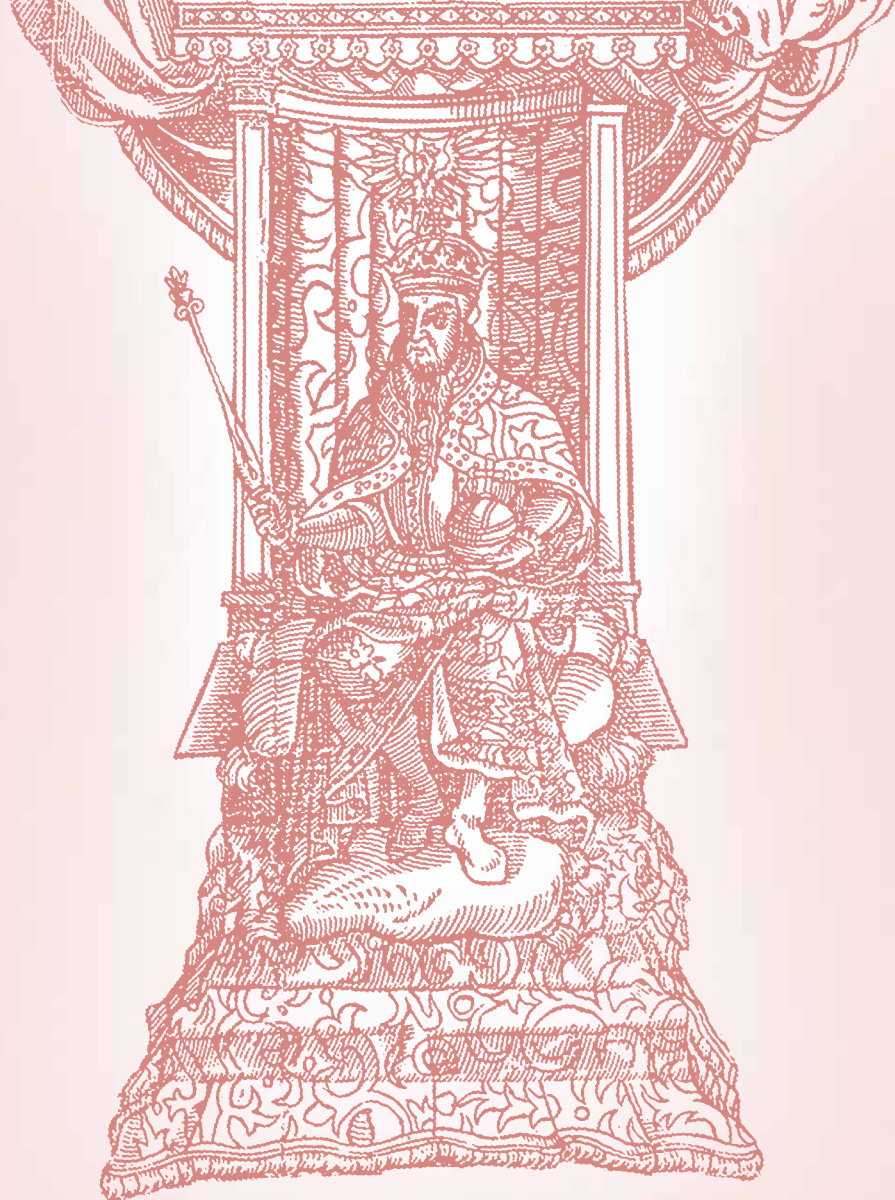


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# 550-lecie

## Parlamentaryzmu Rzeczypospolitej

Biblioteka Sejmowa



# The origin of Sejm

The origin of the Polish sejm is directly connected with the evolution of the medieval estate system. In the 14th and 15th centuries the estates – especially the nobility – gained general privileges, which conditions determined the limits of ruler's power. In order to limit the rights already acquired through privileges, the ruler had to obtain consent of the concerned ones.

In the period, before the consolidation of the Polish state, feudal regional rallies were convened, serving as an advisory body for the local prince. After establishing the centralised rule, the nationwide rallies were convened as well. The known sources describe four such gatherings during the reign of the king Władysław I the Short (1296–1333) (in years 1306, 1318, 1330, 1331). The main part was played by the dignitaries, who formed the royal council. However, along with them, the rallies were attended also by the nobility – the knights. In Latin documents these rallies were referred to as: *conventio solemnis*, *conventio generalis totius Regni*, *parlamentum generale and dieta*. The Polish term comes from Slavic “snem”, “sjem”, “soim” and “sejm” - these words were used to describe a gathering with numerous attendees.

Beside the nationwide rallies, the local ones took place as well – separate for both Greater Poland and Lesser Poland. In lands and voivodships – formed on the basis of the former duchies during the regional disintegration period – dignitaries and noblemen gathered at similar congresses. For such rallies, referred to as the “particular ones”, the term of “land sejmiks” soon became established – *conventiones terrestres*. The resolutions adopted by the sejmiks, called *laudae*, since the second half of the 16th century were entered into the court's registers of the city, where the sejmik took place.

The fundamental principle of all these rallies was the idea of community of all noblemen (*communitas nobilium*), that covered both feudal lords and the knighthood in total. What they had all in common was that they possessed the lands under the *iuris militaris*, also referred to as the chivalric law or the feudal law. By virtue of the privilege, issued in 1374 in Koszyce by Louis I of Hungary (king of Hungary in years 1342–1382 and king of Poland in the period of 1370–1382), they were granted an immunity that limited their tax obligations. The document reads as follows: “Because the said nobility of ours with particular love accepted (...) both our female and male



offspring as their princes and rulers, therefore (...) we release from any tributes, taxes and charges, both general as well as particular ones, regardless of the name, any city, castle, domain, towns and villages, as well as the villagers of the whole Kingdom of Poland belonging to their masters and all the noblemen – and we want them to be free from any services, works and supplies, concerning both people as well as objects”.

From the moment the privilege of Koszyce was issued and confirmed, if it was necessary to acquire funds for the state, the ruler had to gain approval of the privileged ones. And it was much easier to achieve this by the means of a direct meeting. Convening the rallies became a necessity.

Every nobleman belonged to *communitas nobilium* and every nobleman – in accordance with principle that “what concerns all, should be approved by all” (*quod omnis tangit ab omnibus comprobari debet*) – had the right to attend the rally, where the tax decisions were made. It depended on the monarch’s will, if he would have appealed to land sejmiks, provincial sejmiks or to the “general sejm of the whole Kingdom”, as the source dated to half of the 15th century describes. The most convenient form for the nobility, and sometimes for the king as well, were the resolution agreements adopted at a general rally – that is the general sejm. At the turn of the 14th century the general sejm became a standard component of the political system. The expansion of its functions was connected to the election of the king, after the extinction of the Piast dynasty. The general sejm acted as the supreme authority in *interregna* periods.

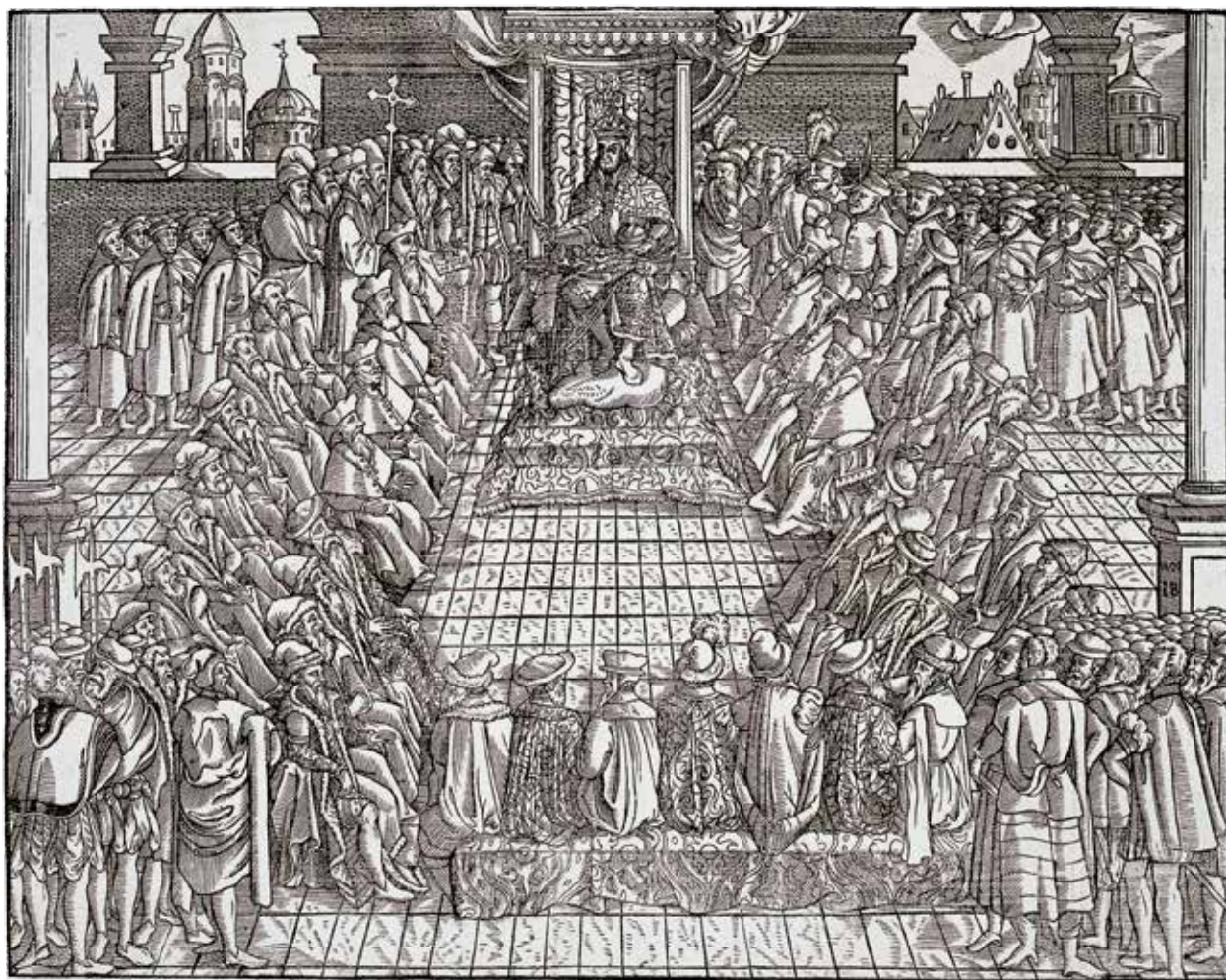
The reign of Władysław II Jagiełło (1386–1434), who made attempts to ensure the throne for his sons and therefore sought wide support, was the period of political emancipation of the nobility and strengthening of the political position of the sejm. It gathered once a year and the most usual gathering place since the 40’s of the 15th century was Piotrków (called “Trybunalski”, since it was the place where the highest court for noblemen was established – the Court Tribunal), because it was situated in the centre of the country.

Polish sejms, just like the Hungarian ones, gathered many attendees. According to Jan Długosz, in year 1447 “arrived the king Casimir to the Piotrków city and along with his prelates, barons and noblemen, who gathered there in great numbers, took



The legislative rally during the reign of king Casimir III the Great





The sejm during the reign of the king Sigismund II Augustus

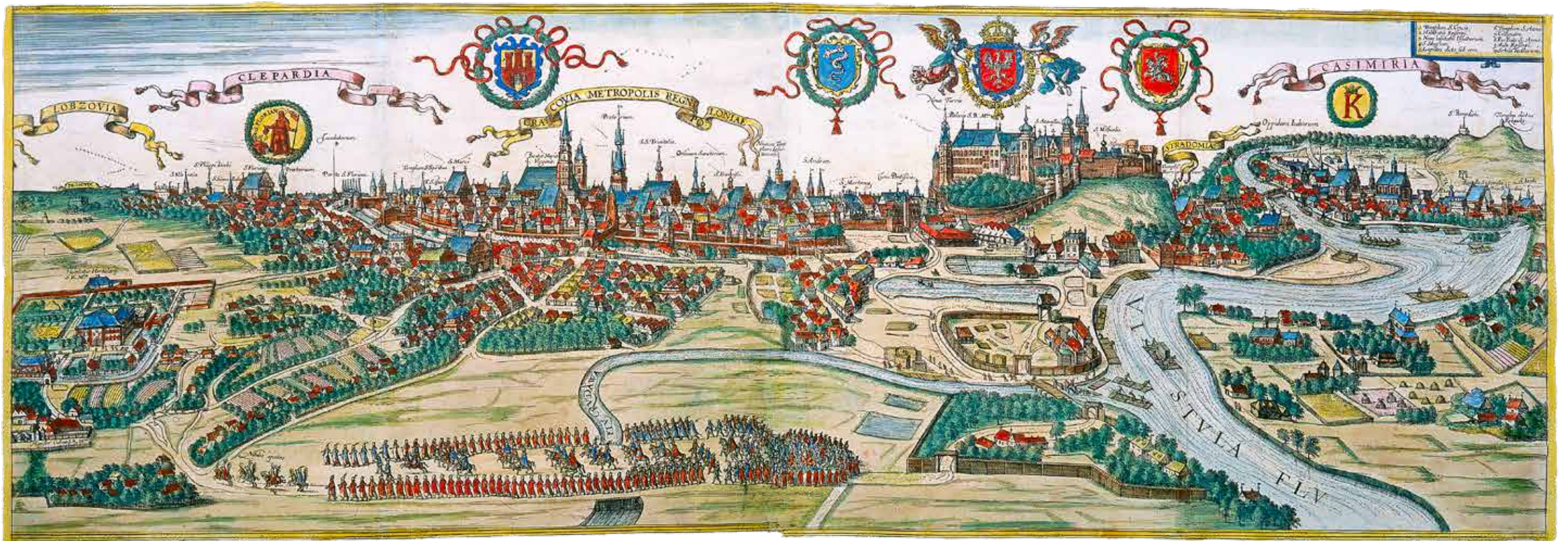
part in the general sejm for seven days". Simultaneously, as these gatherings gained more and more power, the representative character of Polish sejm was being formed, although slowly and sometimes with long intervals. Already in 1424, the representatives of the nobility were chosen for the provincial sejm of Lesser Poland - 2 representatives for every clan or family bearing a coat of arms. Soon, during the election sejm after the death of king Władysław II Jagiełło, the sejm was attended not only by the magnates but also by the representatives of said *conventiones terrestres* – that is land sejmiks. Despite the fact that more and more noblemen took part in general sejms, till the 15th century the royal council remained the decisive body.

The fundamental importance to the position of nobility sejmiks were the Nieszawa Statues, in which it was stated: "In order that the Commonwealth was ruled in the future more soundly, we desire and hereby establish that no new institution shall be formed at private councils, nor any expedition would be possible without the presence of the general gathering of the nobility; for the future we also pledge that all matters newly proclaimed shall be previously debated, brought into existence and adopted by the sejmiks".

Strengthening the position of sejmiks with the Nieszawa Statues (1545) resulted in a slow departure from attending the sejms in great numbers. In the second part of the 15th century the local sejmiks and provincial sejmiks adopted resolutions on taxes and general levy, which were later agreed upon or legitimized at the general sejm.

In January 1468 the decisive step was made to strengthen the political position of the general sejm. Convening the sejm was preceded by meetings of king Casimir and the nobility at the provincial sejmiks – of the Lesser Poland in Wiślica, 25–30 June, 1468 and of the Greater Poland in Koło, 13 July 1468. The reason for king's actions was the necessity to pay the soldiers, who took part in the war against the Teutonic Order. Both the sejmiks – in Lesser Poland in Wiślica and in the Greater Poland in Koło – acceded to king's request but the final decision was postponed till the general sejm, which was to begin on 9 October 1468. The king ordered to appoint two deputies at each county sejmik in the Kingdom, who were to come later to Piotrków to take part in the general sejm. The sejm, which proceedings were opened on 9 October 1468, was attended by the king, the members of his council and the deputies, chosen





View of Cracow

in sejmiks. Its description can be found in the work of Jan Długosz: “The next day, on Saturday, that is after the day of John the Baptist [25 VI 1468], [king Casimir the Jagiellon] leaves Cracow [...] after arriving to Wiślica he attends the congress there demanding adopting resolutions supporting him in paying off the mercenary troops. Postponing this matter for consideration, [...] [the knights and the nobility] shelved the final decision to the general rally in Piotrków, so that it would not seem that they hastily agreed to an important matter without the presence of the deputies, coming from Greater Poland. Subsequently, they choose two deputies in every county, who later will be entitled to agree on a modest help [a tax]”.

By acknowledging the principle of representation and centralization, the sejm of Piotrków (1468) became the essential point in developing the modern parliamentarism. It should be emphasised that the rule of Casimir the Jagiellon, lasting almost half of the century, was a period of increased activity of the sejm, however its proceedings and rules were not carved in stone in form of laws. In period 1447–1491 there were almost 50 sessions of the sejm. The gathering place was usually Piotrków.

In the 15th century the make-up of the sejm was slowly being formed. Long before, it was widely acknowledged that the presence of the king is necessary. His council was slowly transforming into the upper chamber – the senate. At the turn of the 15th century it comprised of 87 senators (9 bishops and 78 secular senators), appointed for life by the king himself. The elected representatives of the sejmiks, at the beginning only 40 of them, formed the Chamber of Deputies. The bicameral sejm was established as the body consisting solely of noblemen. The representation of clergy was limited to archbishops and bishops, who were the members of the senate. The senate consisted also of voivodes, castellans and five, so called, ministers (the Grand Marshal, the Grand Chancellor, the Deputy Chancellor, the Grand Treasurer and the Court Marshal). The order of takings seats in the Senate reflected the prestige hierarchy of every office and land, not the real power. The ministers took the last seats in the Senate, while the most powerful of them – the hetmans – were not even a part of it until 1768.

The cities, confident in their privileges and partially governed by German patriciate, naively believed that if they did not take part in the sejms, they would evade the



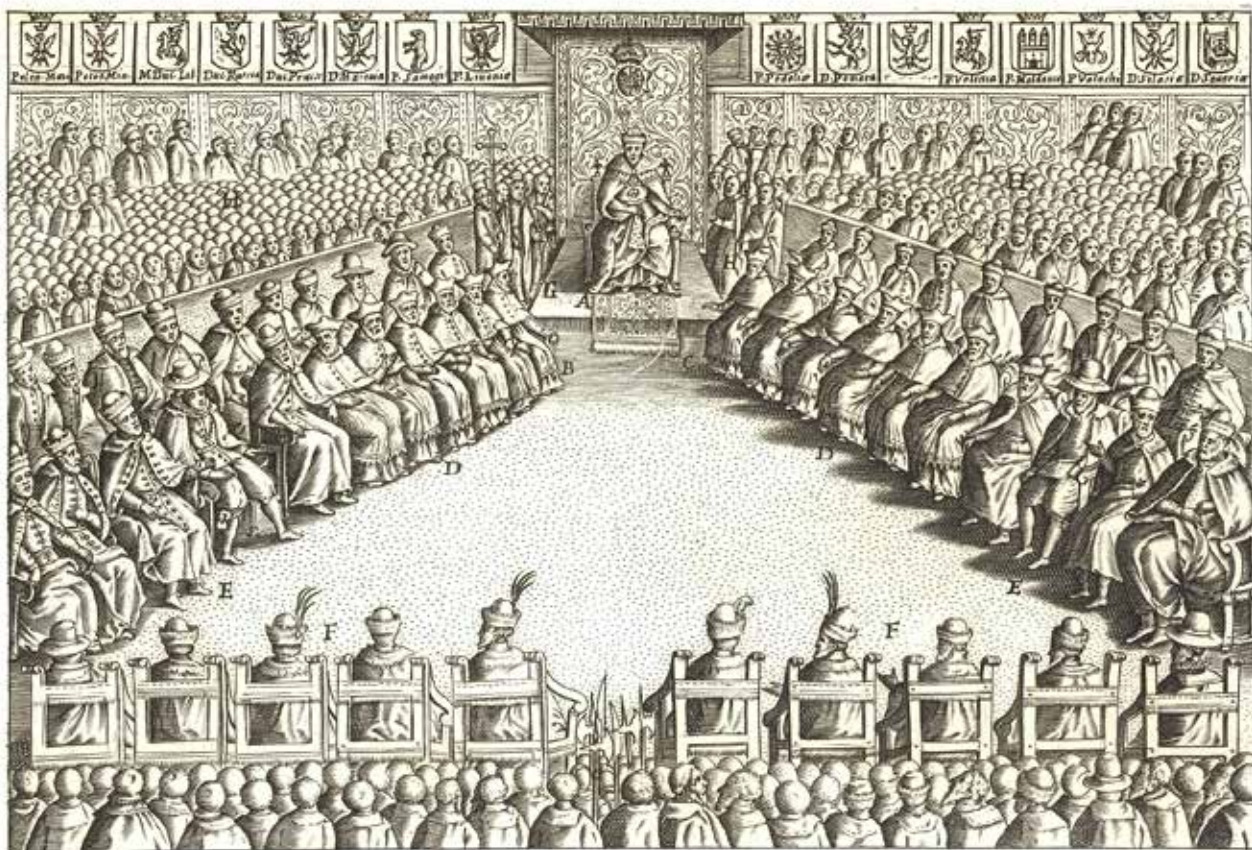
resolutions adopted by the sejms, especially those concerning taxes. Soon, they were denied the right to attend the sejm by the nobility. The representation of the lower clergy, in form of delegates of chapters, did not stand the test of time. It debated at its own synods, which – if the sejm adopted a new tax – many times adopted similar resolutions, to pay a voluntary tribute to the national treasury, defined as *subsidium charitativum*. The representation of the Church in the political system of the state comprised of the bishops, who had a very high position in the royal council.

In 1505, at the sejm in Radom, the parliamentary practice of the former years was codified. The adopted resolution reads as follows: “Because the general laws and public statutes concern not an individual but the nation as a whole, consequently on this general sejm in Radom, along with all prelates, senators, lords and deputies of our kingdom we recognised them as fair and valid, which is why we decided that from the time forth for the future and for eternity nothing new (*nihil novi*) shall be proclaimed by us or our successors without common consent of senators and deputies, and if happened would be a discredit and a burden to the Commonwealth and with anyone’s harm or private wrongs or tending to changing the general laws and public freedoms. (...) So that no one, because of the lack of knowledge of the new resolution, does not feel victimized, if anything happened against the resolution, which was not announced to the public, we decided, desiring to proceed all our decisions in an unquestionable manner, that no one is obliged to comply with the new law, unless it was previously announced officially”.

The meaning of the “Nihil novi” for the Polish parliamentarism cannot be overestimated. It stated the developed political concept, based on the system of representation. It constituted legally the general, nationwide sejm, granting it a strong fundament in the form of land sejmiks. They were attended by the nobility of the Kingdom, which was later represented by the deputies at the nationwide, general forum. The foregone general sejms could not gather even a part of the noble community, which now gained the real influence on public matters.

In order to adopt an important constitution – as all the resolutions of one sejm were called – the consent (*consensus*) of three participants was necessary: the king, the senate and the Chamber of Deputies. The structure of three estates forming the





A. Sacra Regia Maiestas. B. Archiepis. Gnesnen. Primas Regni. C. Archiepis. Leopoliens. D. Episcopi Senatores. E. Palatini, Castellani. Senatores. F. Magistratus et Officiales Regni et Magni Ducatus Lithuaniae. G. Senatores. H. Officiales Curiae, Aulici, et Secretarii R. S. M. I. Nobiles Regni et Mag. Duc. Lith.  
*Jacobus Laurer. 1622. Roma in Privilegio Summi Pontificis.*

The sejm during the reign of the king Sigismund III Vasa

Sejm was taking shape – estates that legislated the laws. The sejm was convened by the king, in a special act sent to sejmiks (so-called *legatio*), determining subjects of the future debate. The sejmiks chose their deputies and formed their own stand on the matters, described in the *legatio*. Sejmiks lasted usually one day, although sometimes they were prolonged even for a whole week. The number of attendees was not larger than 200. It is estimated that the right to participate in a sejmik was used by not more than only few percent of the entitled ones.

The sejms of the modern era did not have rules of procedure, nor clearly worded rules on their functioning. The sejm sessions proceeded accordingly with a custom that was established by practice. The proceedings were opened with a ceremonial Holy Mass, concelebrated by the present bishops. Since the beginning of the 17th century it was customary that the sermon was preached by the royal preacher, who tried to refer to the program of the current sejm. One of the preachers was famous Piotr Skarga (1536–1612), although he never delivered his famous “Sejm Sermons” at the sejm. They were appreciated in 19th century and treated as prophetic, what resulted in, among others, the famous painting of Jan Matejko.

All present senators and deputies attended the Holy Mass, regardless of their religious beliefs. In the nave of the same church, after the service, the deputies greeted the king. The chancellor, on behalf of the king, explained, what the king expected from the sejm. Then the senators took the floor, delivering their speeches, called *vota*.

Generally, both chambers worked separately. The senate debated under the leadership of the king, while the Chamber of Deputies was managed by the marshal. It was a prestigious position but with limited competences. The marshal announced the stand of the chamber to the king, spoke on its behalf in joint sessions with the senate and – what should be emphasised – managed the editing and wording of sejm resolutions.

The symbol of this office was the marshal's staff. The marshal knocked it on the floor at the opening and closing of the sessions, as well as when he had to call the deputies or the noblemen listening to the debate (so-called “arbiters”) to order. A vivid description of how the staff was used by the marshal can be found in the work of Stanisław Konarski (1700–1773) *O skutecznym rad sposobie* [On an effective way of councils]: “One would feel sorry for the dignified marshal of the Chamber,





who, bearing the burden of the whole Commonwealth on his shoulders, for at least an hour or sometimes during whole sessions, like he had nothing better to do, has to grapple and tussle with swarms and continual wave of those who push themselves into the middle of the chamber; he has to push them away with his own arms and the grave staff that he holds”.

The debate in the senate took form of senators’ statements on the discussed matter. In practice, only the senators holding the highest seats – there was a strict hierarchy – expressed their opinions on the merits of the case, the rest simply supported one of the worded stands. The senate, deriving from the royal council, kept its advisory character. Therefore there was no voting and the result of its debates was the so-called conclusion, that is the summary of the senators’ opinion, presented at the end by the king or more frequently by the chancellor. This chamber rarely debated at full strength, because the senators were not paid the *per diem* allowance and for a numerous group of lesser castellans, who occupied less important, sometimes called also “stick”, seats, the expensive costs of the stay and taking part in the proceedings were a difficult obstacle to overcome.

The proceedings of the Chamber of Deputies were opened usually at 10 AM and lasted until 4 or 6 PM, although sometimes, especially at the end of the planned 6-week-long session, it was necessary to continue proceedings “at the candlelight”. The candles were probably lit anyway, even during the day, because the former Chamber of Deputies was generally a dark room.

The sessions of sejm committees and meetings of deputies and senators, representing various provinces of the Commonwealth took place in the morning, usually between 7 and 10 AM. On Sundays and during church holidays, there were no sejm sessions. The course of the sejm proceedings might be reconstructed with the help of sejm diaries. Until the Four-Year Sejm (1788–92) they were not official documents. They were written by observers as a private order. The diaries made by observers sent by the city of Danzig (Gdańsk) are considered the most accurate ones.

The Chamber of Deputies functioned by way of broad *consensus*, although among the noble parliamentarians of the 16th century there was a rather large group that supported the idea of majority voting. Ultimately it was recognised that striving for



View of Lublin



reaching the *consensus* was the highest value. During one of the debates somebody stated that “majority is prejudicial in important matters of the Commonwealth, which does not need lines [used for counting votes] but a full, common consent of all present”. The “consent” was the situation when no one objected to the draft resolution. In practice, in the 16th and at the beginning of the 17th century, individual objections, were simply ignored. In 1590, when 30 deputies (of 136 present) left the chamber as a sign of protest, the sessions were continued and the legal validity of the adopted resolutions was never questioned. In the second half of the 17th century the rule of *consensus* understood as a unanimous agreement became strictly followed. In this period, the unanimity was regarded “the apple of the freedom’s eye”. In 1652 the objection of an individual deputy (*liberum veto*) prevented prolonging the sejm sessions, proposed in order to adopt important resolutions. In year 1669 *liberum veto* disrupted the sejm before the proceedings came to an end. Applying the unanimity rule at first obstructed the efficiency of the sejm and later it even made the proceedings impossible.

The crisis of the sejm, caused by *liberum veto*, resulted in a question – how to improve the proceedings, not giving more power to the king in the same time. It was aspired to design changes in such a way to divide the *liberum veto* custom, understood as the objection to a specific resolution, from *liberum rumpo*, that is a custom of disrupting the sessions and invalidating all what was done till that moment as a result of a protest of one, single deputy.

It is worth mentioning that in the 16th century reaching a consensus agreement was easier, because the make-up of the Chamber of Deputies was more uniformed. In addition, *consensus* granted greater respect for resolutions both in view of the king and the senate. It was also consistent with the fundamental rule of *quod omnes tangit* [...]. In practice, it made reaching compromise possible, what was especially important during the age of the Reformation. It should be also emphasised that the unanimity, reached in not infrequently turbulent debates, meant also a wider acceptance of the effects of the sejm work. The fact, that the Commonwealth for many years was not torn by serious internal conflicts, had its sources also in the acknowledged sejm custom.



The deputies came to the sejm usually limited by the instruction of their votes (imperative mandate). The nobility feared that granting their representatives “full power” (free mandate) poses a threat that they would be influenced by the royal court, which was always suspected of absolutist tendencies. However, transgressing the instructions by the deputy did not bear any negative legal consequences. By voting against the instruction the deputy risked only the anger of other noblemen at best, provided that during the debriefing sejmik he did not succeed to convince his voters that his deeds were justified.

In the 30s’ of the 16th century there was quite a big group of deputies who were appointed repeatedly, were politically experienced and knew sejm procedures, which were based on customs. Mikołaj Sienicki (1521–1583) was appointed the deputy many times and because of his oratorical skills he was called a Polish Demosthenes. The best proof of the trust and authority, that he earned among the nobility, is the fact that he held the marshal office during nine sejms, in the period 1550-1575. Sienicki, cooperating with chancellor Jan Zamoyski (1542–1605), was the spokesman of strengthening the country through improvement of the executive authority and the judiciary. In the famous speech, 1558, regarding so-called execution of goods he said: “Nothing disturbs governing the Commonwealth more than the greed of those, who took the goods of the Commonwealth, although they, even in the council of Your Majesty, state that they are ready to give it all back, for the good of the Commonwealth. Thus we, passing the judgement on ourselves, of what any of us holds against the law, came to Your Majesty and return to the Commonwealth any unlawful privileges that any of us has and present them at Your feet, hoping that all of the present here, even those who came here privately, whoever they are, would do the same and that we would not have to reprimand them.”

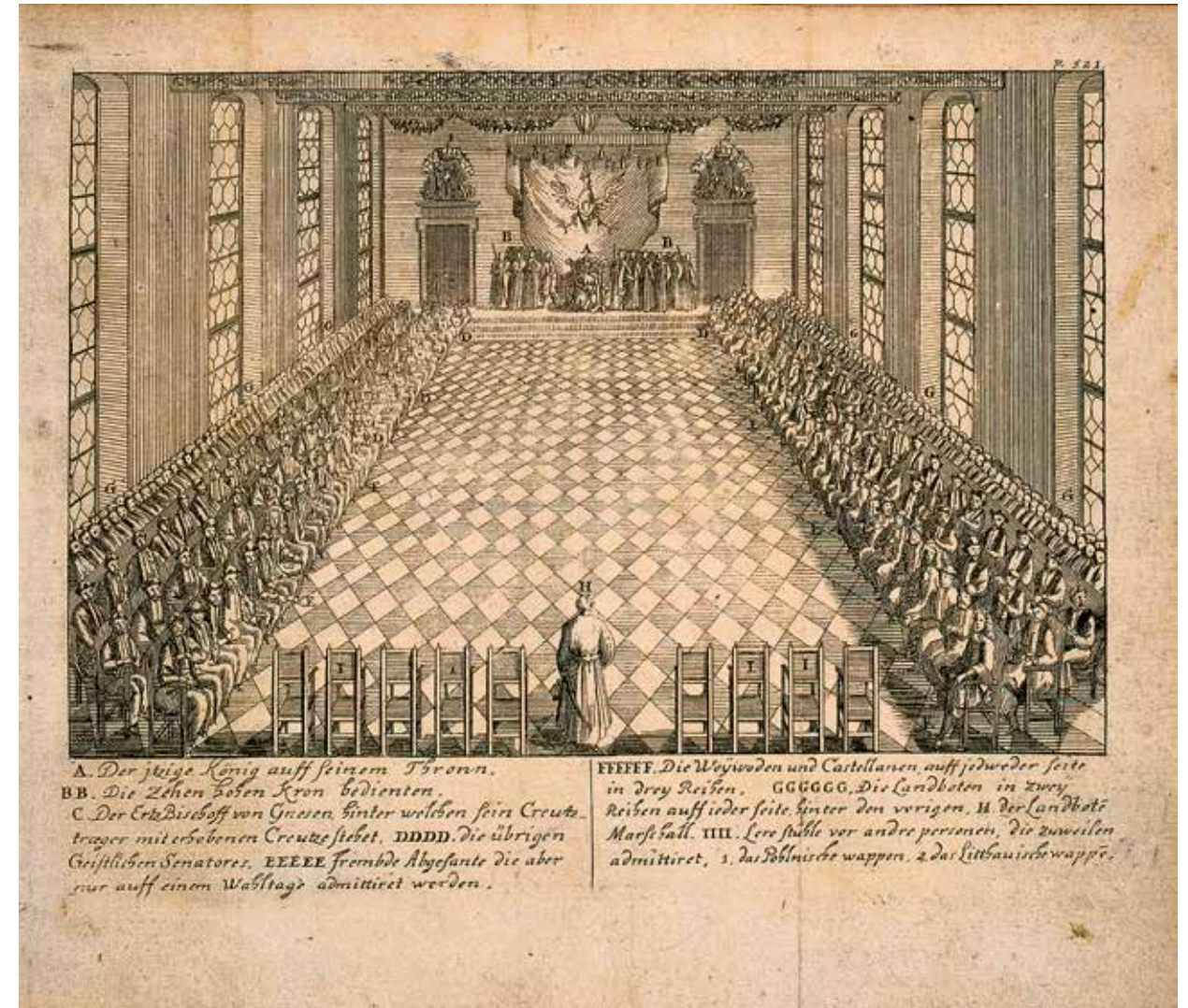
The sejm competences during Sienicki times covered almost the whole legislation. The king had only the right to issue edicts regarding royal cities, royal fiefs, peasants in Crown lands and also regarding mining matters. The rest belonged to the sejm. Taxes were the most frequent subject of debates. Tax resolutions were always subjects of vivid controversy. In the 16th and 17th centuries the whole Europe was rebuilding the fiscal basis of the states. The hitherto prevailing sources of incomes – real estates,

tariffs and taxes on exploitation of minerals, indirect taxes – turned out to be too low to fund the needs of the army. It was necessary to enforce higher and higher direct taxes but the agreement of the subjects had to be granted.

Sejm assented to calling for general levy, heard envoys of foreign states, decided on sending so-called grand missions and gave direction of the foreign policy. It also controlled the government – the Grand Treasurers gave accounts of the fiscal matters to the Chamber of Deputies. The power of pardon and amnesty belonged to the sejm as well. The rule of the king in the 17th and 18th centuries was also limited by the resident-senators, chosen at the sejm, whose advice the king was obliged to seek in important matters and who also reported to the subsequent sejm.

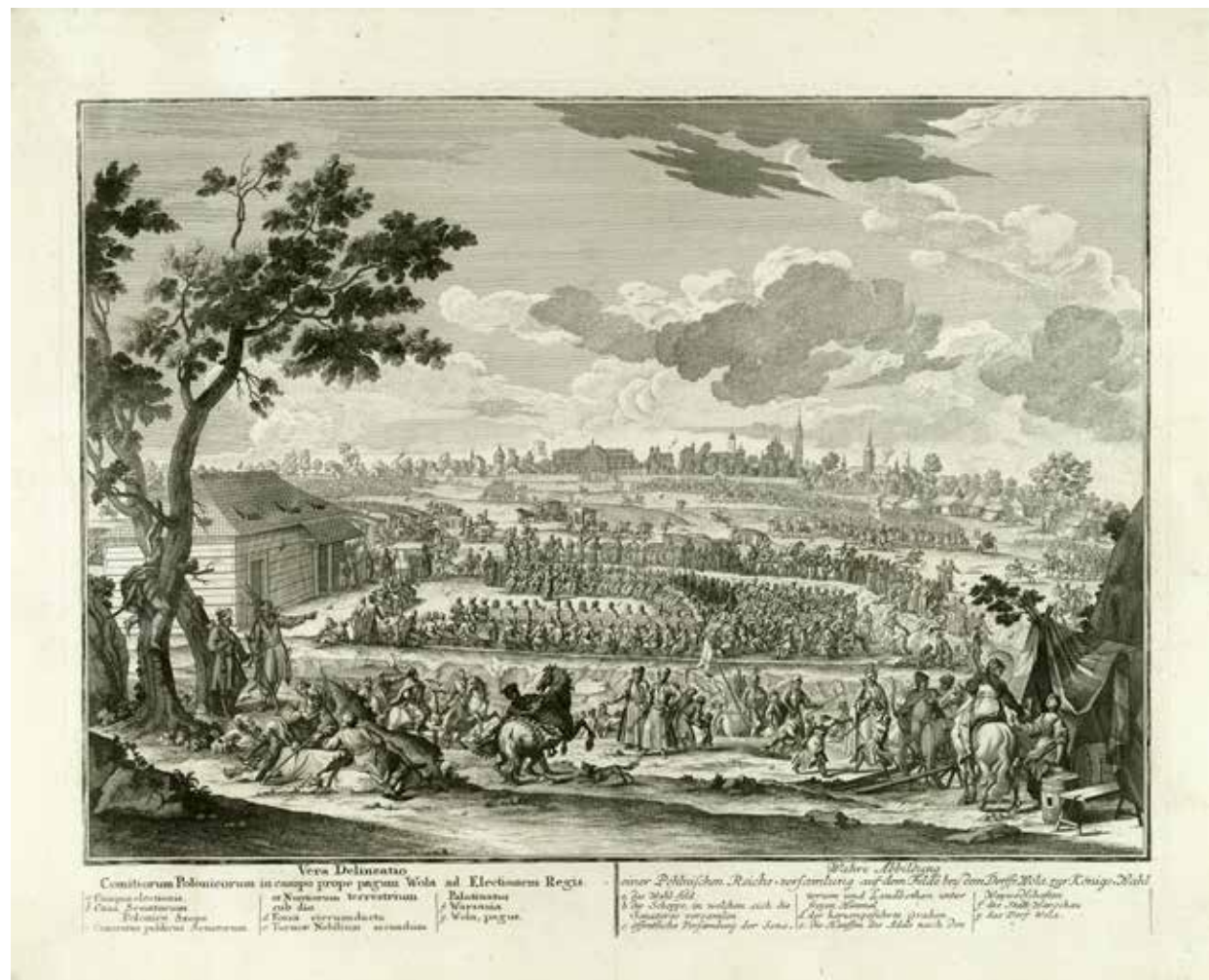
All the sejm resolutions were referred to as “constitutions”. They obtained legal force in the moment they were entered to the court’s register in the city, where the sejm took place. Since year 1507 they were published separately in print and then sent by the royal chancellery to starost cities, where they were to be publicized by various means. Till year 1453 Latin was the official language, later the resolutions were written and published in Polish. In 1588 a special commission was established, appointed by the sejm, which task was to edit the wording of the resolutions.

In the first half of the 16th century, the nobility that was active in the scope of public matters, formed a programme of execution of laws. They demanded a strict abidance by the law in force. The political blade of their reforms was turned against the king and the magnates. The disputations with the monarch at the sejm consolidated the solidarity of the Chamber of Deputies and favoured forging political talents among the parliamentarians. Increasing conflicts were overcome in 1562, and since that moment the cooperation of king Sigismund II Augustus (ruled in period of 1548–1572) with the Chamber of Deputies shaped up rather well. The effects of the cooperation were considerable. The revindication of the state goods, held by the magnates, finally came to a successful end. A fund for upkeeping the regular army was established. The relation between the Kingdom of Poland and the Royal Prussia, incorporated to the Crown (formally in 1454) but enjoying quite liberal autonomy, including own provincial sejm, so-called Prussian estates, was finally regulated.



A. Der jetzige König auff seinem Thron.  
 BB. Die Zehen Hofen Krong bedienten.  
 C. Der Erzbischoff von Gnesen, hinter welchen feier Creutz-  
 trager mit erhebenen Creutze steht. DDDDD. Die übrigen  
 Geistlichen Senatoren. EEEEE fremde Abgesante die aber  
 nur auff einen Wahltag admittiret werden.  
 FFFFFFF. Die Woywoden und Castellanen, auff jedweder seite  
 in drey Reiben. GGGGGG. Die Landboten in zwey  
 Reiben auff ieder seite hinter den vorigen. H. Der Landthats  
 Marschall. IIII. Lere stühle vor andre personen, die zuweilen  
 admittiret, 1. das Polnische wappen, 2. das Litthauische wapp.

The sejm during the reign of the king John III Sobieski



The election of the king Augustus II the Strong, in Wola village near Warsaw



The greatest achievement of the execution movement was the Union of Lublin, signed between Poland and Lithuania at the sejm in 1569. The document reads as follows: "And as the Kingdom of Poland and Grand Duchy of Lithuania are now as one inseparable, same body, and thus the same is one and common Commonwealth, which comprises of two states and nations, united as one nation."

The Union brought considerable changes in the organisation of the sejm of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The act of the union stipulated community of the monarch and the parliament – considered the highest authorities of the newly formed federation. The central offices, army and treasury remained separate. The composition of the sejm was extended. The senate was joined by Lithuanian voivodes, castellans and ministers, whereas the Chamber of Deputies was reinforced by 40 deputies, chosen by county sejmiks of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. As a result of incorporation to the Crown the lands of Podlachia, Wolhynia and Kiev, the amount of crown deputies and senators grew even more. Since 1569 the sejms were attended regularly by deputies from three Prussian voivodships and as a result of incorporation of Livonia (1561) also the deputies from Livonia. The sejm of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth consisted of 300 individuals (140 senators and 167 deputies).

Signing the real union consolidated the position of Warsaw as the gathering place for the sejms. In period 1493–1793 there were 250 sessions of the sejm and more than a half of them (140) took place in Warsaw. After establishing a common sejm for both Polish Crown and Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Warsaw turned out to be situated more or less in the centre of the Commonwealth. In year 1679 it was decided that every third sejm was to gather in Grand Duchy of Lithuania – in Grodno. In general, there were 11 sessions held in there, including the last sejm of the Commonwealth in 1793. Before the Union of Lublin 19 sessions were held in Cracow. After year 1569 the former capital city hosted only coronation sejms, because the enthronement of the new kings traditionally took place the next day after the predecessor's funeral, which always took place in Cracow. The last king of the Commonwealth, Stanisław II Augustus (reigned 1764–1795), was coronated in Warsaw.

After the death of the last Jagiellon (1572), during the first free election, the nobility formed the fundamental political laws that were later presented to the

elect-king, Henry de Valois (1551–1589) and because of his name these documents were called the Henrician Articles. They stipulated the general competences of the sejm, including assenting to calling the general levy and declaring war, enforcing taxes and tariffs and the control of the king, performed by the resident-senators. The Henrician Articles introduced new obligation of the king – convening general sejm every two years and – if necessary – also the extraordinary sejms. The proceedings of the general sejm were to last six weeks, while the extraordinary sejms – two weeks.

Adopting the Henrician Articles meant that the king's reign was based on the agreement between the elect and the estates – in practice only with the estate of the noblemen. This solution strengthened the position of sejm, which became equal to the monarch – but as a matter of fact the sejm was even more powerful supreme authority of the Commonwealth.

Because of the free election, two new types of sejms were established – the convocation sejm and the election sejm. They were convened by the primate of Poland, who as the *interrex*, substituted for the king during interregna periods. These sejms determined the continuity of the central authority. The decisions of the convocation sejm in matters of the public order and the national security were fully valid in law. Other resolutions had to be sanctioned by the newly elected monarch.

The convocation sejm was formed as a confederation, what meant that the resolutions were adopted by the majority of votes. In order to emphasise the equality of all lands of the kingdom, the proceedings were managed every day by a different representative of each voivodship. The first convocation in year 1573 adopted the act “on peace between those of various beliefs” (*pax inter dissidentes in religione*), which for many years established religious tolerance in the Commonwealth. The document reads as follows: “And as in the Commonwealth of ours the diversity of Christian faith is rather fair, in order to prevent any unrest, which could arise because of that and which we see in some other countries already, we promise this to ourselves in our name and in the behalf of our sons and daughters, eternally and bound by an oath, faith, honour and conscience, that although we vary in faith, we pledge to keep peace within the nation, never to spill blood or penalise by plundering the goods, by jail or by banishment because of the faith and various churches and never to give



help in any kind to any sovereignty or office in such deeds. And indeed, if someone would want to spill blood, we should all consider, what pretext, decree or any juridical opinion was the reason of the deed”.

In 1573 the principles of the free election of a king were also defined. The right to vote belonged to any member of the noble estate (election *viritum*), the votes were cast by voivodships, the primate announced the results and the Grand Marshal delivered the message to the voivodships. The election made up a combination of the representation principle (there were more deputies than for the general sejm) with the principle of direct democracy (any nobleman had the right to come to the election sejm and vote).

In Polish history this period is referred to as the “Golden Age”. In this period the sejm became the supreme authority in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The state could function without the monarch, his reign was based on the agreement, and the noblemen had the right to refuse obedience to the king. The sejm, however, was the necessary component, without which the Commonwealth, understood as the *corpus Reipublicae*, was simply unthinkable.

Although the proceedings did not always ended with adopting new laws or at least appropriate taxes but until the second half of the 17th century the reality was far from the image, that was created by historiography and journalism, seeing the sejm only through the disaster of the partitions of the Commonwealth. Of 40 sejms, that were held in years 1550–1600 only 9 ended with no results. In the subsequent half-century only 6 of 46 sejms were dissolved without adopting a single resolution. After decades of splendour, the second half of the 17th century brought the crisis of the noble parliamentarism. The reign of the kings of the House of Wettin – Augustus II the Strong (reigned 1697–1733) and Augustus III (reigned 1733–1763) - are considered the times of the deepest decline. It's enough to say that in years 1740–1760 there was not even a one sejm that could be considered successful.

The deep crisis made the educated class realise the necessity to carry out reforms. The reign of Stanisław II Augustus, although marked with the disaster of the first partition (1772), benefited with attempts to reform the system. In order to ensure efficiency of the sejm the reformers used the old custom of “proceedings under the

confederation staff", what made the *liberum veto* practically impossible. In such a way the Great Sejm (1788–1792) debated, at which the Constitution of 3 May, 1791 was adopted – the second in the world only to the American one and the first modern, basic law in Europe.

The preamble of the Constitution reads as follows: "Persuaded that our common fate depends entirely upon the establishing and rendering perfect a national constitution, convinced by a long train of experience of many defects in our government, and willing to profit by the present circumstances in Europe, and by the favourable moment which has restored us to ourselves; free from disgraceful shackles of foreign influence; prizing more than life, and every personal consideration, the political existence, external independence and internal liberty of the nation, whose care is entrusted to us; desirous, moreover, to deserve the blessing and gratitude, not only of our contemporaries, but also of future generations; for the sake of the public good, for securing our liberty, and maintaining our kingdom and our possessions; in order to exert our natural rights with zeal and firmness, we do solemnly establish the present Constitution, which we declare wholly inviolable in every part, till such period as shall be prescribed by law, when the nation, if it should think fit, and deem necessary, may alter by its express will such articles therein as shall be found adequate. And this present Constitution shall be the standard of all laws and statutes for the future Diets".

The Constitution of 3 May 1791 enforced a political system, which was a compromise of monarchic and republican visions. Sejm was to comprise of two chambers – the Chamber of Deputies, consisting of the representatives of the nobility, chosen at sejmiks for a two-year-long term and the Senate, consisting of dignitaries appointed by the king. All the resolutions were supposed to be done in a majority voting. The crown was to become a hereditary office. The king exercised power along with, appointed by him, Guardians of the Laws, who were politically liable to the parliament. The constitution declared the tripartition of power into executive, judiciary and legislative branches.

The Constitution of 3 May 1791 went down in history of the nation as the sign of its greatness, remained in Polish tradition as the symbol of striving for the inde-



Nobility in voivodship uniforms



pendency as well as the actions aimed at strengthening the country and expanding the freedoms of its citizens.

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The Polish parliamentary tradition formed within the space of 550 years and within various cultural models and ideological views. The exhibition “550 years of Polish parliamentarism” shows the development of parliamentary system in Poland, with special emphasis on the institutionalization process of the representation principle – based on putting the republican ideas into effect. A vivid, hundreds of years of age panorama of Sejm history has been presented, beginning with rallies of estates and the Golden Age of general sejm in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the sejm in the time of the Duchy of Warsaw and the Congress Poland, through a rich heritage of the parliamentarism of the Second Polish Republic, to the institutions performing duty in exile – because there the tradition of the Polish parliamentarism remained.

We hope that the selection of the exhibits (among others: old and new prints, bills, posters, leaflets, maps, illustrations, medals, paintings, deputy badges and cards, marshal's staffs, photos, films, furniture, cloths, including reconstructed voivodship uniforms) allows the best possible presentation of 550 years of the parliamentarism in the political landscape of the Commonwealth.

*Wojciech Kulisiewicz, Błażej Popławski*



The exhibits presented at the exhibition belong to the following institutions:

- ☛ The Archive of New Files
- ☛ The Archive of the Warmia Archdiocese in Olsztyn
- ☛ Central Archives of Historical Records
- ☛ National Archive in Cracow
- ☛ National Archive in Poznań
- ☛ The Jagiellonian Library
- ☛ The Congress Library
- ☛ The National Library
- ☛ Warsaw University Library
- ☛ Central Museum of Textiles in Lodz
- ☛ National Film Archive – Audiovisual Institute
- ☛ Institute for Literary Research (IBL) at the Polish Academy of Sciences
- ☛ Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland
- ☛ Museum of Polish History
- ☛ Museum of the Polish Peasant Movement
- ☛ National Museum in Cracow
- ☛ National Museum in Poznań
- ☛ National Museum in Warsaw
- ☛ Museum of Independence
- ☛ Wilanów Palace Museum
- ☛ Museum in Piotrków Trybunalski
- ☛ Museum of Warsaw
- ☛ Museum of the Polish Army
- ☛ National Digital Archives
- ☛ Bishop's Palace in Krakow
- ☛ Military Office of Historical Research
- ☛ Ossoliński National Institute
- ☛ Royal Castle in Warsaw

Some of the exhibits were lent by private individuals. Almost a half of the several hundred of presented museum collections belongs to the Sejm Library (detailed descriptions available at the Virtual Museum of Sejm: [wirtualnemuzeum.sejm.gov.pl](http://wirtualnemuzeum.sejm.gov.pl)).

The exhibit curator is dr. Piotr Kopszak of the National Museum in Warsaw, dr. hab. Michał Kopczyński is the author of the scenario. The selection of the exhibits was done in the cooperation with the Museum Collection Department in the Sejm Library. The arrangement project of the exhibition area was developed by visual artist Krzysztof Burnatowicz. The multimedia posts were prepared by Sowa-Szenk company.

The exhibit would be available in the chambers on the first floor of the west wing in the Royal Castle in Warsaw (Pokój Królewiczowski „Trzeci”; Sala Senatorska, Galeria Warty, Nowa Izba Poselska, Pokój Wstępowy Nowej Izby Poselskiej) in July and August 2018.



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