Saints and Orators: the role of religion in cementing the legitimacy of the Jagiellonian dynasty in Poland and abroad, 1480-1506

Natalia Nowakowska, Lincoln College, Oxford University

Introduction

The Jagiellonians originated as belligerent war-lords of the Lithuanian empire, the last pagan state in Europe. In 1383, the dynasty reinvented itself when Jagiello converted to Catholicism and married the Queen of Poland, Jadwiga of Anjou, who soon died without issue. It was by his third wife, the Lithuanian princess Zofia, that Jagiello founded his own line. As a result of these events, the Jagiellonians gained control of the Polish crown – the price of this was an ongoing crisis of legitimacy for monarchy and dynasty alike. Three factors undermined the Jagiellonians’ authority as kings.

The first problem was one of identity. Throughout the Middle Ages, Poland had been ruled by the great Piast dynasty, who came from the heartlands of the kingdom. The Jagiellonians were foreigners, and their Lithuania, even after its conversion, was deeply influenced by an Orthodox Russian culture which was highly alien to most Poles.

Secondly, the constitutional situation changed rapidly. After Jadwiga’s death, the royal council invited Jagiello to stay on as king on an ad hoc basis, but would not recognise him as the true heir to the Polish throne – he was rex but not heres. Over the next decades, Polish magnates exploited this constitutional no-man’s land to carve out new rights for themselves, to the extent that the monarchy was transformed into an elective institution. The Jagiellonians retained the throne, sometimes by the skin of their teeth, as in 1492. Every time a Jagiellonian king was elected, he was forced to sign new privileges as part of his acclamation. The most notable of these was the Mielnica Privilege of 1501, with which Aleksander Jagiellon signed away a raft of royal rights.

Finally, the dynasty’s legitimacy was further undermined by a period of poor political leadership during the reigns of Jan Olbracht and Aleksander. The years 1492-1506 were a time of military disaster and financial crisis – the chronicler Miechowita wrote that people were so weary of Tartar attacks that they begged God to take Aleksander’s soul.

1 K. Stadnicki, O tronie elekcyjnym domu Jagiellonów w Polsce, Lwów 1880.
The dynasty’s most formidable political opponent was the royal council itself. All bishops and provincial governors had the right to sit in the council – although the king controlled the appointed of these dignitaries, such men legally had to be nobles. In effect, the royal council was the power-base of the magnate classes who wished to whittle away the powers of the crown. It was over this group that the Jagiellonians had to assert themselves, and as part of their campaign they turned to the Church.

**Background: religion and political authority in the late 15th century**

The very institution of kingship was so deeply rooted in religious ideas in late Medieval Europe, that it might be best outline contemporary notions of Christian kingship before considering how the Jagiellonians innovated.

The concept of a semi-sacerdotal, theocratic king developed in the Carolingian age, and predates the formation of the Polish state. This idea was expressed in the Medieval coronation ceremony, where the king was ritually anointed by bishops, demonstrating that his power to rule came from God. The ninth-century prayers expressing these beliefs were used in coronation ceremonies throughout Europe, and were certainly used at Polish coronations in 1446, 1492 and 1501.

However, these theories about the nature of the king’s power did not proscribe what kind of life the king should lead – he simply had to swear to observe the true faith, defend the Church and govern with justice. In the late fifteenth century, however, West European political theorists became increasingly preoccupied with the qualities of a good prince. A body of “princely advice” literature arose in Italy, and it was widely argued that a prince should possess both the classical virtues of prudence, temperance and fortitude, and Christian virtues. Francesco Patrizi, for example, writing in the 1470s, argued that faith “gives forth such splendour that all the other virtues of kings and princes becomes obscure without it.”

---

7 ibid, p.126.
The Northern humanists were even more emphatic about the need for Christian piety. Erasmus, who was widely read in Poland, wrote in *The Education of a Christian Prince* (1516):

“What must be implanted deeply and before all else in the mind of the prince is the best possible understanding of Christ… Let him become convinced of this, that what Christ teaches applies to no-one more than to the prince.”

So, in European educated circles it was strongly argued that piety was the mark of a good prince. However, how far these ideas were familiar in Poland, or articulated there, is harder to gauge with certainty.

**Jagiellonian Piety**

There are of course difficulties in assessing the exact motivations behind the Jagiellonians’ religious acts. It is a given of Polish historiography that the dynasty were all deeply pious, and there is practical evidence to suggest that this was true of many leading members of the family, although not all – they procured indulgences, attended Mass regularly, gave alms, and invested much money and effort in organising Masses for their own souls, and those of relatives already suffering in Purgatory. It would be simplistic to see the dynasty’s political uses of religion as purely cynical – personal devotion and dynastic concerns are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, a prince might believe that he has a special relationship with God by virtue of his office, or that his opponents’ views are genuinely ungodly.

Before discussing the unusual aspects of Jagiellonian piety, it should be pointed out that some of the key threads of the family’s religious culture were pan-European, common to all social groups and entirely typical of the period. These include a devotion to the Virgin Mary, and a piety focused on contemplation of Christ’s Passion. There was a contemporary belief that mystical experience of the events of the Passion was the surest way to salvation – accordingly, the dynasty owned several relics of the True Cross, and extended coverage of the theme dominates their personal prayer books.

**Royal themes in religious art**

There are three main ways in which the Jagiellonians appear to have drawn on Christian concepts to bolster royal authority. The first concerned their public artistic commissions, i.e. church paintings, liturgical books and altar pieces. These objects could only contain religious images, but a second layer of meaning

---


could be conveyed by the specific way in which an apparently familiar subject was depicted.

One of the greatest works of manuscript illumination to emerge from the Kraków court was the three-volume gradual (a book of music for cathedral choirs) commissioned by Jan Olbracht for the capital’s cathedral and completed in 1506, which has been carefully analysed by the art historian Barbara Miodńska. Miodńska identified some six miniatures which she argues impart a distinctly political message; here we shall summarise two.

In the gradual, there is a tendency to depict God the Father, Christ and the Holy Spirit with imperial attributes, which is out of keeping with contemporary practice in miniature painting. In the illumination which accompanies the song “Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus”, for example, all three persons of the Trinity wear imperial crowns and hold their own orbs, while a choir of angels themselves sing the “Sanctus” hymn. (image 1) This has echoes of the Polish coronation ceremony, when the congregation would acclaim the king three times once he was enthroned.

The miniature for St. Andrew’s eve is similarly unusual. Rather than showing the apostle himself, as was common in liturgical books, the artist included an image of Christ as “Salvator Mundi”, an unusual subject in Polish fifteenth-century art. (image 2) Here, Christ is depicted holding an orb, the symbol of his kingship over the earth; this iconographic scheme is also called “Maiestatis Domini”. This tradition of frontal portraiture grew out of representations of emperors in Byzantine art.

Although this repeated depiction of God as King might seem an obvious theme, rooted as it is in Christian thought, we should remember that the gradual focuses on this to the exclusion of other aspects of divinity: here, God is shown as Ruler, rather than Creator, Redeemer or Judge. The gradual therefore shuns other popular fifteenth-century images, such as Christ as the Man of Sorrows or the Throne of Grace.

Finally, even in their devotion to Mary the Jagiellonians tended to emphasise her royal attributes. The most common image of Mary within royal circles was as “Mulier Amictae Solis”, the Woman of Light described in Revelation. (image 3) This image was popular in Poland because of a papal indulgence offered to anyone who said a set prayer before it, “Queen of Heaven, Mistress of the World”, a meditation on Mary’s role as Christ’s Regent and her royal lineage, as heiress of the

---

House of David. The “Mulier Amictae Solis” can be found repeatedly in the Jagiellonians’ commissions. In one fresco in Kraków cathedral, the dynasty are shown casting their crowns down before her, in a kind of dialogue between royalty. The suggestion might be that the family are mystically closer to the Mother of God than other mortals, because they share in her royal nature.

**National shrines**

Another strand of the Jagiellonians’ use of religion was the creation of national shrines. The first of these was the monastery of Lysa Góra, where the most important relic of the True Cross in Poland was kept. Kazimierz IV made seven separate pilgrimages to this holy site, and was a generous patron to the monks who were its custodians. We have already seen how the royal family went on to promote the cult of the Holy Cross in Kraków.

The other leading shrine in the kingdom was – and still is – the monastery of Jasna Góra, in Częstochowa. In the late fourteenth century, in the same decade that Jagiello converted to Catholicism, an important Byzantine icon of the Virgin Mary found its way to Poland. Jagiello embraced the cult of the icon enthusiastically, and Kazimierz IV and his sons continued this tradition, granting lands to the Pauline monastery and making pilgrimages. In 1472, in a ceremony in Kraków, the king, queen and royal children all joined the confraternity of the monastery of Jasna Góra.

The miraculous relics of the Holy Cross and the Marian icon were two of the greatest religious treasures in late-Medieval Poland. By supporting their cults through bequests, ceremonial visits and public devotion, the royal family built up these centres as national shrines - a useful way of creating a Polish identity for themselves. Thus, the Jagiellonians moulded a role for the monarchy as guardians of Poland’s holy places.

**Patron Saints**

At the start of the Jagiellonian era, Poland had four patron saints of equal status: Florian, an early martyr, and three Slavs, Adalbert, Wenceslas and Stanisław. The dynasty unapologetically elevated this last figure above the others. Saint Stanisław, Bishop of Kraków, was murdered just outside the city in 1079, on the orders of King Boleslaw III. There are virtually no contemporary sources for his

---

12 ibid, pp. 126-144.
life, but two detailed and influential “Lives” emerged from the Jagiellonian court in the late fifteenth century, written by the Italian humanist Callimachus, and by the historian Jan Długosz. The saint’s cult had two centres – Skalka, where he was martyred, and Kraków cathedral, where he was buried beneath the high altar.13

The Jagiellonians’ enthusiastic adoption of Saint Stanislaw is both the most characteristic and the most overtly political of their religious practices. Kazimierz IV, when residing in Kraków, participated in weekly public pilgrimages from the Wawel castle to Skalka.14 There is some evidence that the Jagiellonians’ first-born sons were placed on the high altar, above the saint’s tomb, during their baptisms; this was also were the royal insignia were placed during coronation ceremonies and royal funerals.15

As the political situation worsened, the Jagiellonians’ became more emphatic in their public devotion to the saint. In 1501, after Aleksander’s election and the Mielnica Privilege, the king’s brother, Cardinal-Prince Fryderyk Jagiellon, drafted a new coronation ceremony which placed great emphasis on the eleventh-century martyr. As part of this new “Ordo”, the king-elect was to make a pilgrimage to Skalka on the eve of the ceremony, and a new conclusion to the spectacle was added, in the form of a prayer to Saint Stanislaw, said over the newly-crowned king as a blessing.16

This is only one example of the growing preoccupation with Stanislaw. The altar-piece for Jan Olbracht’s tomb, commissioned by his family in 1501, shows Stanislaw standing beside the dead king. (image 4) The new gold ducats minted by Aleksander in 1503 showed the monarch’s fact on one side, and the image of “Stanislaus episcopus” on the other.17

However, it was Cardinal Fryderyk who most consistently linked himself and the dynasty with the saint. Fryderyk’s exquisite collection of ecclesiastical garments featured dozens of images of Stanislaw, and the cardinal was always depicted kneeling before the saint – he can be seen in this guise in the missals

17 ibid, p.55.
printed in his dioceses, and on his tomb.\(^18\) (images 5-7) Most spectacularly of all, in 1501 Fryderyk and his mother, Queen Elizabeth Habsburg, commissioned a new gold reliquary for the head of the saint: studded with black diamonds and sapphires, it was the most expensive such item created in the entire fifteenth century.\(^19\) (image 8)

In these ways, the Jagiellonians tried to create the impression that Saint Stanislaw was the supreme national saint, the custodian of royal insignia and patron of the monarchy itself. At the same time, they stressed their own devotion and mystical connections with him. The Jagiellonians were not alone in using such a tactic: in the 14\(^{th}\) century, the Anjou dynasty in Hungary had taken up the cause of indigenous saints, and one of the main commissions of Władysław Jagiellon, King of Bohemia from 1472, was a major fresco cycle of the Czech saint Wenceslas.\(^20\) It is interesting to note that there are no prayers to any of Poland’s national saints in the Jagiellonians’ prayer books, suggesting that this was a subject for public, not private devotion.

However, this whole-hearted adoption of Stanislaw is problematic. Like Thomas a Beckett, the martyred bishop can symbolise the struggle between Church and Crown, and the victory of the latter – as such, he seems an ambiguous choice for a dynasty hoping to increase its powers. It is possible that the Jagiellonians saw Stanislaw’s death as an embarrassment to the previous dynasty rather than to the Crown itself – it may have been a way of favourably comparing their godliness with that of the Piasts. This cult was most strongly embraced by Cardinal Fryderyk, who united in his own person the State and Church, and was therefore the reverse image of Stanislaw, or his fulfilment. Fryderyk seems to have used this cult to proclaim his own unique status in Poland.

Theoretically, the cult could just as easily have played into the hands of the Jagiellonians’ opponents. For example, the main public texts about the saint are the prayers of the Kraków liturgy, which were read out on the saint’s feast-day all over southern Poland. These refer to Bolesław III as “rex scelestus” and


“tyrannus”. The use of the emotive term “tyrant” could potentially have made Saint Stanislaw a touchstone for the magnates’ political campaign to limit royal powers. However, if contemporaries perceived these ambiguities, they did not comment on them. In fact, the Jagiellonians’ patriotic interests may have left them with little choice of patron – until they secured the canonisation of their own prince, Kazimierz, Stanislaw was the only Polish saint available in the fifteenth century.

**Foreign policy – religion and the Jagiellonians’ image abroad**

Religious ideas also permeated Jagiellonian diplomatic language and strategies, and were a key feature of the way in which the dynasty presented itself abroad. Polish foreign policy at this time was focused almost exclusively on defence – against Turks, Tartars, Muscovites, Moldavians and the Teutonic Knights. Conveniently, all but one of these arch-enemies were non-Catholic.

**Piety on the European stage**

Given that much of Polish foreign policy was conducted with one eye to the papacy, the Jagiellonians’ could use their devout image to some effect in their diplomacy. The leading Polish diplomat of the period, Erasmus Ciołek, made two formal speeches in Rome in 1501 and 1505, congratulating Alexander VI and Julius II respectively on their elections. In these orations, Ciołek dwelt at length on the Catholic merits of his masters: he explained that the Jagiellonian princes had been brought up by “most Christian parents” to revere Christ and his vicar; he invoked Kazimierz IV’s brother, Władysław, who “died most gloriously” in battle against the Ottomans in 1444, and argued how worthy Prince Fryderyk was of his headship of the Polish Church. These orations also stressed the Jagiellonians’ loyalty to Rome. We can imagine that such deferential speeches went down well, especially with these popes, who were harangued on all sides by West European orators, accusing them of corruption, nepotism and warmongering.

---

21 Missale cracoviensis 1484, f. 114f.

**Crusader kings?**

The main subject of diplomatic exchange with western Europe was, however, the need for an anti-Ottoman crusade. The orations made by two of Poland’s leading diplomats, Callimachus and Erasmus Ciolek, demonstrate how the Jagiellonian kings presented the crusade issue in negotiations with West European powers. Callimachus and Ciolek, both humanists in the kings’ confidence, proclaimed one basic message: that only Poland stood between Christian Europe and an Ottoman invasion. Royal letters to Rome also describe Jagiellonian Poland as “antemurale”, the bulwark of Christendom.

Callimachus’ oration “Ad Innocentium VIII de Bello Turcis Inferendo”, written in 1490, is rather optimistic, predating as it does the intense Tartar and Turkish attacks of the late 1490s. Callimachus gives a detailed exposition of the Jagiellonians’ crusading exploits on the eastern front over the decades, arguing that the tenacity with which they have fought pagans shows that they were not acting merely in defence, but out of a deep love for the Christian faith: “they too could have lived in peace, had they not their souls been inflamed with religious ardour”. Callimachus concludes that only the Polish Jagiellonians can lead a successful pan-European crusade.

By contrast, Ciolek’s speeches of 1501 and 1505 stress the precariousness of Poland’s military situation after decades of holy warfare. Ciolek argues that Western Europe is under a binding moral obligation to help the kingdom. To strengthen his case, Ciolek draws on religious imagery: he says that the pope is personally entrusted with the care of God’s entire flock, but that thousands of Poles are abducted annually by Tartars. Similarly, the profane behaviour of raiding pagans is described – the pillaging of churches, murder of the clergy, and desecration of the sacraments.

Jagiellonian diplomats in Western Europe, then, portrayed the on-going national defensive campaign as a war for Christ. Interestingly, there is little use of such language in internal Polish documents, such as royal decrees and parliamentary acts, and it may be that the crusade angle was pushed far more strongly abroad.

Using the rhetoric of crusade and salvation, the Jagiellonians presented the defence of Christendom as a massive national enterprise, with the king at its head. In this way, Polish diplomats emphasised in European courts the uniqueness of the dynasty, and how indispensable it was to the security and integrity of Christendom.

---

Conclusion

Through nuanced public devotion, gifts and commissions, the Jagiellonians used Christian concepts to declare that earthly kingship was a reflection of the court of heaven, where God enjoyed ultimate authority and power. Thus, the crown could be made to appear glorious and unchallengable by its very nature. Furthermore, to mask their foreign and recently pagan origins, the Jagiellonians loudly developed the most distinctive aspects of Polish national religious life. The objective was to demonstrate that there was a natural link between a holy institution, and a godly family. By casting themselves as tireless crusaders in their diplomacy, the dynasty tried to win international respect, which could in turn strengthen their domestic position.

It is striking that much of the Jagiellonians’ religious ceremonial and almost all their commissions were focused on the royal capital and, in particular, on its cathedral. The choice of this building enabled the dynasty to present its message to a diverse range of groups. (image 9) The canons who ran the cathedral on Wawel hill mostly came from the nobility of Malopolska; some came from wealthy Kraków burgher families. Most had benefices in numerous other dioceses or enjoyed positions in the courts of Polish bishops; a large proportion worked in the royal chancellery, which executed the will of the royal council; equally, many were senior professors at Kraków university. The men most intimately involved with the cathedral therefore had a network of links extending well beyond the capital. The political messages in Jagiellonian piety would have been intended primarily for these groups: to shape the thinking of the Crown’s supporters, and to challenge its opponents.

Finally, we should ask what made contemporary Christianity such an attractive tool for a beleaguered royal dynasty. Here, the answer might lie in the fact that the Jagiellonians’ most dangerous opponents were often bishops. It was the Bishop of Wrocław, Krzysztof of Kurowiez, who drafted the Mielnica Privilege, and the one-time Primate, Zbigniew Oleśnicki, who tried to oust the dynasty in 1492, when he brought an army and a Piast candidate to the royal election. In such a situation, it was important to seize the initiative, given the considerable ideological resources at the disposal of ecclesiastics.

However, recent upheavals in the Catholic Church made it far easier – both intellectually and politically - for the Jagiellonians to claim that monarchy lay at the heart of Christian communities. Throughout the first half of the fifteenth century, the conciliarist movement had challenged the papacy, developing sophisticated arguments in defence of corporate government. The papacy’s political victory over, and keen suppression of, this movement in the 1440s signalled the triumph of a monarchical view of the Church. Therefore, Polish bishops would have been on perilous ground if they had attempted to resurrect conciliarist ideas within the national church, in order to further their political,
anti-crown projects. Kazimierz IV and his sons were, in a sense, riding the wave of Rome’s successes.

The Jagiellonians weathered the storms of the early sixteenth century and went on to rule Poland for another seventy years. For a range of historical reasons, Catholicism remained an important part of Poland’s national and political life, and the Jagiellonians’ celebrated piety therefore continues to earn them popular affection even today. This phenomenon is best symbolised by Kraków Cathedral itself (image 10), which is effectively a shrine to the dynasty – virtually every chapel contains the tomb of a Jagiellonian monarch, and Cardinal Fryderyk’s massive sarcophagus looms large in the nave. Yet the cathedral is strongly identified as a Polish shrine, a national Parthenon, illustrating the Jagiellonians’ posthumous success in conflating their interests and identity with that of their adopted country.
Bibliography

Printed Sources
Erasmus Ciolek (Vitellius), Oration in praestita obedientia Sanctissimi nostro Iulio Pape Nomine serenissimi principis Alexandri Regis Polonie et Magni Ducii Lithuaniae, Rome 1505.
Erasmus Ciolek (Vitellius), Erasmi Vitelli Prepositi Vilnensis Illustriissimi Domini Alexandri Magni Dux Lithuaniae secretarii et oratoris ad Alexandrum Sextum Pontificum maximum in prestita obedientia, Rome 1501.
Missale cracoviensis, Mainz 1484.

Secondary Literature
Borkowska, Urszula, “Jasna Góra w pobożności królów polskich”, in Studia Claramontana nr. 4, Częstochowa 1983.
Borkowska, Urszula, Królewskie Modlitewniki, Kraków 1995.
Kopec, J., Męka Pańska w religijnej kulturze polskiego średniowiecza, 1975 Warsaw.

Miodńska, Barbara, Rex Regum i Rex Poloniae w dekoracji malarskiej gradułu Jana Olbracht I Pontołfika Erążmy Ciołka – z zagadnieniem ikonografii władzy królewskiej w sztuce polskiej w. XVI”, Kraków 1979.

Papee, Fryderyk, Aleksander Jagiellonczyk, Kraków 1999 (2nd edition)


Stadnicki, Kazimierz, O tronie elekcyjnym domu Jagiellonów w Polsce, Lwów 1880.