



Polish-Lithuanian Unions at the Turn of the 15th and 16th Centuries

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Research into the background of the Polish-Lithuanian union has a rich history and has resulted in equally rich literature on the subject. As Juliusz Bardach noted: “the question of the Polish-Lithuanian union in historiography constitutes a weighty academic problem in its own right”.¹ In the last ten years alone, apart from many individual studies and critical articles, three comprehensive monographs on the union only during the Jagiellonian dynasty have been published,² while another, in a study on the Krewo Agreement (1385), was announced by Waław Uruszczak.³

One of these works was published as part of the Lithuanian Institute of History’s significant publishing series “Lietuvos užsienio politikos dokumentai XIII–XVIII a.” and refers to the less frequently discussed Union Treaties, the Vilnius Treaty of 1499 and the Mielnik Treaty of 1501.⁴ What distinguishes this work from others depicting

¹ BARDACH, J. Krewo i Lublin z problemów unii polsko-litewskiej. *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, 1969, 76, p. 583.

² FROST, R. *The Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania*, vol. I: *The Making of the Polish-Lithuanian Union, 1385–1569*. Oxford 2015; *Akty unii wileńskiej i mielnickiej (1499–1501): dokumenty i studia*. Ed. L. Korczak, J. Kiaupienė. Kraków–Vilnius, 2022; SZULC, D. *Dzieje unii polsko-litewskiej w latach 1482/1492–1569. Od unii dynastycznej do realnej*. Kraków 2024; Two post-conference publications related to the 450th anniversary of the Lublin Union may also be mentioned, see, inter alia. *Unia Lubelska 1569 roku i unie w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej*. Ed. J. Krochmal. Warsaw, 2020; *450 lat Unii Lubelskiej: Kongres Dwóch Unii: od Unii Lubelskiej do Unii Europejskiej*. Ed. K. Czerlunczakiewicz, H. Mącik, M. Trzewik. Lublin, 2020.

³ URUSZCZAK, W. *Unio regnorum sub una corona non causat eorum unitatem. Unia Polski i Litwy w Krewie w 1385 r. Studium historyczno-prawne*. Kraków, 2017, fn. 1, p. 3.

⁴ *Akty unii wileńskiej i mielnickiej (1499–1501): dokumenty i studia*. Ed. L. Korczak, J. Kiaupienė. Kraków–Vilnius, 2022. The preparation and publication of the paper was made possible thanks to a research grant from the National Science Centre, registration number 2017/25/B/HS3/01063, entitled “The

the history of the union is that it looks primarily from the side of treaty documents and diplomatics, for which the political and diplomatic struggles over the shape of the union form only a background. The authors of the studies that make up the volume have, as far as possible, remained faithful to the assumptions of the structure of the study proposed for the first time in the book on the Acts of Krewo,⁵ and kept also in the second volume of the series on the Acts of the Horodło union.⁶ The presented work, like the Horodło volume, was created as a joint research effort by Lithuanian and Polish historians, but has so far only been published in the Polish language version.⁷ Compared to the two previous volumes, the number of studies in the present one has increased. While in the case of the Krewo Union the authors had to deal with one document, and in the case of the Horodło Union with three, but, drawn up by the chancellery of the Polish side, the Vilnius-Mielnik volume dealt with twelve acts documenting the negotiations between Poland and Lithuania in 1499–1501. These acts came from the chancelleries of both the Polish Kingdom and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. For this reason, the authors have prepared two studies on diplomatics (Polish and Lithuanian), two on the political situation of each of the aligning parties and two catalogues of seals (affixed to documents issued by the Lithuanian chancellery and the crown chancellery respectively). The presence of Union documents in the political life and legal culture of both states of the Jagiellonian monarchy is presented in one study.

Although five documents of the Vilnius Union of 1499, and seven of the Piotrków-Mielnik Union of 1501, were published earlier,⁸ in accordance with the requirements of the publishing series “Lietuvos užsienio politikos dokumentai XIII–XVIII a.,” a new edition has been prepared to facilitate quick access to the texts and to render them as faithfully as possible. This enables conclusions to be drawn about the scribe him or herself, and the chancellery with which they were associated, by examining the graphic form of the texts (the older editions used the classical spelling form). Among the acts compiled was also the “Privilegium electionis regis Alexandri in regem

National Science Centre. *Acts of the Polish-Lithuanian Union from 1499–1501. Documents and studies*”, carried out at the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences in Kraków.

⁵ 1385 m. rugpjūčio 14 d. Krėvos aktas. Ed. J. Kiaupienė. Vilnius, 2002.

⁶ 1413 m. Horodlės aktai: dokumentai ir tyrinėjimai / Akty Horodelskie z 1413 roku: dokumenty i studia. Ed. J. Kiaupienė and L. Korczak. Vilnius–Kraków, 2013.

⁷ The 2013 monograph on the acts of the Horodło Union was published in a bilingual version – Lithuanian and Polish – as it was then possible to correlate the funding of Lithuanian and Polish research projects in time. The realisation of the plans to publish *Akty unii wileńskiej i mielnickiej (1499–1501): dokumenty i studia* in Lithuanian, as well as *1385 m. rugpjūčio 14 d. Krėvos aktas* in Polish remains an open question.

⁸ All of them, except for the decree on the election of Alexander Jagiellon as king (pp. 53–62 of this edition), can be found in the monumental publication by S. Kutrzeba and W. Semkowicz, cf. *Akta Unji Polski z Litwą 1385–1791*. Kraków, 1932, No. 71, 73–80, 82–83.

Poloniae" (Piotrków, 3 October 1501) with the appendix "Modus eligendi regis", the last edition of which dates from 1913.⁹

The study of Union diplomatics at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries begins with an extensive study by Krzysztof Pietkiewicz, whose subject matter is richer in content than the title suggests (*Documents of the Polish-Lithuanian Union at the Turn of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, pp. 79–122). Based on materials from the 5th book of entries of the Lithuanian Metrica, he accurately reconstructed the Polish-Lithuanian negotiations that led to the renewal of the union in 1499. Above all, however, it proved what political rationale and objectives guided each of the negotiating parties. The rest of the study is the characterisation of the external features of the documents issued by the Grand Ducal Chancellery and the examination of their form, with the distinction between the form of the three powers of attorney for Lithuanian deputies-negotiators, and the form of the Acts of Union of 1499 and 1501 themselves. This is a subject rarely addressed in Lithuanian diplomatics, which makes the author's findings all the more valuable. He proved that the act of the Vilnius union is "simply a redrafted and agreed version of the act prepared in 1496 in Cracow",¹⁰ while as far as the unclear date of the act known as "Modus eligendi regis" is concerned, he finally decided in favour of 25 October 1501. Pietkiewicz assessed that technically the Grand Ducal Chancellery was not inferior to the Crown Chancellery, and the documents "are characterised by neat handwriting, typical of the turn of the 15th/16th century Gothic italics with relatively few conventional abbreviations",¹¹ and only the handwriting of one of the scribes, Adam Jakubowicz of Kotra, is transitional to humanistic handwriting. The author's analyses and findings are an invaluable contribution to the knowledge of the functioning of the chancellery of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, its writing culture and legal and political terminology at the dawn of the modern era.

A study by Waldemar Chorążyczewski (Polish royal chancellery at the time of the Vilnius and Mielnik union. Modernisation elements, pp. 123–163) presents a different approach to the presentation of the conditions under which the acts of union were prepared by the Polish side. This is a look from the perspective of the organisational changes of the royal chancellery, with the author focusing on the modernisation elements at the dawn of modern times. In this connection, he focuses a great deal of attention on the personnel composition of the chancellery, especially the sealers (chancellor, sub-chancellor), the numerous secretaries involved in the royal court's filing process, and the even more numerous scribes (as many as 87), for whom the reigns of Jan Olbracht and Alexander Jagiellon were a period of greatness. He put the number of

⁹ For full details of the basis of the edition, the surviving original and copies, and the 3 earlier editions, see *Akty unii wileńskiej i mielnickiej (1499-1501): dokumenty i studia*, are given in the presented monograph, pp. 53 and 60.

¹⁰ *Akty unii wileńskiej i mielnickiej (1499-1501): dokumenty i studia*, p. 99.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

secretaries active during the “Union” years at 13. The author’s earlier research allows him to recall in detail the workflow of the Registry and to point out that in the “Union” years it is still possible “to observe a discrepancy between actum and datum, although “the delay of the time of issuance of the document in relation to the time of the legal action becomes less frequent and shorter”.¹² In characterising the royal document, which W. Chorażyczewski treats as a long-lived phenomenon, he goes beyond the years 1499–1501 to notice its new features here too, including the decreasing share of parchment documents in the total pool of documents produced; the spread of the signature as a means of authentication; and the gradual differentiation of the four main types of documents. He devotes some attention to the form of the different types of royal documents and their sealing, particularly noting the emergence of the “depleted” seal in the Jagiellonian era. Among the author’s important observations is one on the change in monarchical titularity during the “Union” period. He looked at documents from a short period of time, juxtaposing the abbreviated and full titulature of John Olbracht, in which the Polish state is clearly separated from Lithuanian and Prussian rule (*nos Joannes Albertus Dei gratia rex Polonie nec non terrarum Cracovie, Sandomirie, Siradie, Lancicie, Cuiavie, supremus dux Lithwanie, Russie, Prussie ac Culmensis, Elbingensis et Pomeranie*) with full Alexander titulature (*nos Alexander Dei gratia rex Polonie, magnus dux Lithwanie nec non terrarum Cracovie, Sandomirie, Siradie, Lancicie, Cuiavie, Russie, Prussieque Culmensis, Elbingensis et Pomeranie*).

*After the Mielnik Union, the Lithuanian title took a permanent place right after that of the Polish king, and before the lands already integrally united with the Kingdom of Poland before that. The authority is three-pronged. It consists of Polish, Lithuanian-Ruthenian and Prussian territories.*¹³

Later, elsewhere, he made a definitive diagnosis:

*Although the Mielnik Union did not enter into force, it is evident that in the bureaucratic practice and propaganda of the state royal chancellery it was an accomplished fact.*¹⁴

The next two studies describe the historical background to the preparations for the Vilnius and Mielnik unions, but take a different point of view. For Lidia Korczak (*Among Polish supporters of the Union*), it seems more interesting to show the Union negotiations as a challenge faced by the Jagiellonian dynasty than to characterise the internal relations and international position of the Polish Kingdom, already well known

¹² Ibid., p. 145.

¹³ Ibid., p. 153.

¹⁴ CHORAŻYCZEWSKI, W. Polska kancelaria królewska czy system kancelarii centralnych dawnej Rzeczypospolitej? Perspektywa przyszłych badań. *Archiwa – Kancelarie – Zbiory*, 2024, 15 (17), p. 112.

from the literature on the subject.¹⁵ The introduction of the terms of the Vilnius Union *de facto* “violated the previous *principium* of the dynasty, i.e. the hereditary right of the Jagiellons in Lithuania”.¹⁶ The Grand Duke Alexander’s consent to them meant, on the one hand, that the inherent rights and position of the monarchs lost out to the noble elite consolidating in the system of power in the Kingdom of Poland, and, on the other hand, that this Jagiellon, in a situation of strong international threat, placed the importance of the continuation of sovereign Lithuania in a union based on mutual guarantees to grant *communia auxilia* above dynastic interests. In addition, the author has devoted considerable attention to the involvement of the inner circle of the Kingdom of Poland, the dignitaries centred in the Senate around the Primate Cardinal Frederick Jagiellon, in the negotiation and conclusion of the union with Lithuania. The Polish deputies and negotiators of the Mielnik union were at the same time an important part of the electoral college, acting *nomine prelatorum et baronum regni Polonie*, representing the Sejm and this the entire community of the Kingdom. They were at the same time experienced and active politicians.

On the other hand, the author of a study on Lithuania in the “Union” period, Rimvydas Petrauskas (*The Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Mielnik Union*), gave a concise, synthetic account of the condition of the Lithuanian monarchy at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries – the power of the Grand Duke and his personal policy, the institutions of the monarchical court, and the modernisation of the country’s governance undertaken by Alexander Jagiellon, in which the Grand Duke’s chancellery and the experts operating there proved helpful. He regarded the ruler’s activity in economic policy, especially monetary policy, as a *novelty* of Alexander’s time, the granting of Magdeburg law to cities as part of a planned urban policy, and changes in the organisation of the army in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as corresponding to European trends. On the formation of intra-union relations, he took the years 1495–1503 under scrutiny and identified their two main determinants – the threat from Moscow, the Tatars and the Ottoman Empire, and the dynastic policy of the Jagiellons. In the case of the first factor, R. Petrauskas characterised the active foreign policy of the Vilnius court: intensive efforts to neutralise the Moscow threat, either by creating a military alliance against Moscow or by peaceful means. In the case of the second, he analysed the dynastic policy of the Jagiellons during this period and the relations between the brothers, noting “the inevitable contradiction between the interests of the Grand Duke of Lithuania, i.e. the lord paramount in his land, and his royal relatives. [...] the oldest representative of the dynasty had his own plans for Poland and Lithuania. In the meantime, the Jagiellons never managed to agree on any common dynastic policy,

¹⁵ This is especially true in view of the fact that only three years after the publication of the internationally functioning synthesis by R. Frost, its Polish translation was published. *Oksfordzka historia unii polsko-litewskiej. Tom I. Powstanie i rozwój 1385–1569*. Poznań, 2018.

¹⁶ *Akty unii wileńskiej i mielnickiej (1499-1501): dokumenty i studia*, p. 168.

apart from the desire to maintain the thrones already taken”.¹⁷ It was against a backdrop of international tension and disputes within the dynasty that the idea of renewing the Polish-Lithuanian union was revived. According to the author, it is significant that the new policy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania towards the issue of the “renewal” of the union was the result of a political consensus between the ruler and the mighty, which was to be marked by Lithuanian actions until 1501. The evaluation of the provisions of the Mielnik Union, which destroyed a hitherto important and permanent element in the social and political order of Lithuania (the hereditary right of the Jagiellonian dynasty to the Grand Ducal throne), leads Petrauskas to an important conclusion, which should trigger a discussion among historians on the reasons why the concluded union did not enter into force. The author himself regards Alexander Jagiellon and his entourage as the “destroyer” of the Mielnik Union, “because together they did everything to ensure that its provisions remained only on parchment”,¹⁸ and thanks to this the Jagiellonians retained their hereditary rights to the Lithuanian throne. He stressed that the Grand Duke had been educated to be a monarch, and in Lithuania acted in accordance with his idea of monarchical power. The act of union narrowed the ruler’s prerogatives, so it could not form the basis on which Alexander intended to shape his power in the Crown and Lithuania.

The fifth study, by Jūratė Kiaupienė (*Functioning of the records of the union of 1499 and 1501 in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland*), in part provides an overview of the “interpretative” historiography concerning the union of the late 15th and early 16th centuries. It is about those selected works which, in the author’s opinion, “allowed for a broadening of the interpretative field in terms of the process of union renewal and implementation and its effects”. Kiaupienė’s reference to works concerning also the period from the election of Alexander Jagiellon as King of Poland until his death in 1506 indicates that the field of interest should include the problem of non-approval of the union by Lithuanian *praelatos, duces et barones, consiliarios, officiales, nobles et potiores*. She also notes that, in contrast to their Polish counterparts, for a long time Lithuanian historians did not analyse Union documents from the reign of Alexander Jagiellon, instead basing their conclusions on Polish historiography. Above all, they stressed that the Mielnik Union did not acquire the force of law.¹⁹ She devoted considerable space in the review of historiography to a monograph by the Scottish historian Robert Frost, appreciating his different research perspective, “not conditioned by the heritage of any of the contemporary nations of the former union”,²⁰ the widening of the interpretative field of the phenomena studied, and the situating of the problem of union in a broad international and comparative context. In reporting extensively

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 188.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 197.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 213.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 215.

on Frost's view of the process of building a union and a common political nation from the bottom up, and highlighting his invigorating research thought, she seems to be in full agreement with his position. The remainder of the paper is devoted to an analysis of how the documents of the new union function in public life and political discourse (Polish and Lithuanian). Here Kiaupienė gave an overview of researchers' opinions on the keeping of entries in the Crown and Lithuanian Metrica and a list of documents from 1492–1505 relating to the union in the Crown and Lithuanian Metrica.

The seals affixed to the documents of the Vilnius and Mielnik unions have been prepared according to the model compiled and applied by Edmundas Rimša for the edition of the Horodło acts and included in the *Catalogue of seals*.²¹ Descriptions consisting of: 1. the identification of the owner of the stamp; 2. the wording of the legend; 3. a description of the image appearing in the seal field; 4. the dimensions of the imprint, the colour of the wax, the method of connection to the document, and the state of preservation of the bowl; 5. literature and possible reproductions; 6. notes, together with photographs complete the edition of the documents. The collection of seals preserved with the three documents of the Polish side of the Union negotiations from 1499–1501 currently numbers 31 monuments. According to Jakub Rogulski, author of the catalogue of the seals of the Polish side, “the preserved collection is highly representative of the entire set of seals originally authenticating diplomas”.²² Rogulski has made a number of clarifications and corrections in relation to the current state of identification of the described sphragistic monuments, also with regard to the identification of seal bearers. A particularly valuable collection comprises the seals of the Lithuanian lords, which were presented in a catalogue by Marcelli Antoniewicz. In the case of this author, there are even more additions and corrections in description and identification, and the description of some monuments is supplemented by comments on their source value in heraldic and genealogical research of the ruling elite in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Importantly, in addition to descriptions of the surviving seals, a list of the missing seals that were originally attached to the individual diplomas is also presented.

The concluding words of Marcelli Antoniewicz's introduction to the catalogue – “even controversial hypotheses can serve as a point of reference for the formulation of polemical opinions and further discussion, which in turn can deepen the current state of research, not only in the field of strictly sphragistic studies”²³ – can be applied to the entire book, as they express the intention behind the project.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 235–358.

²² Ibid., p. 237.

²³ Ibid., p. 280.