Imagining Christian kingship in Sigismund II Augustus's "Genesis" tapestries at Wawel Castle (1553)

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Chapter One: The Reasons for the Commission

Sigismund Augustus had not even been crowned sole ruler of Poland before he made an exorbitant, labour-intensive, and time-consuming commission using a medium that was the primary European cultural signifier of majesty. The first step in analysing this commission is to explore the intentions behind this decision. Given the scale and expense of the *Genesis* series, it is reasonable to assume that this was a conscious choice on the part of the king to make a clear and impactful statement upon his accession, both to his fellow princes and to his elite subjects. Therefore, we must interrogate the possible reasons behind this choice. While the ideological reasoning behind the choices of tapestry themes will be explored in subsequent chapters, we may begin with an exploration of the medium's significance for royal patrons. Following this, we may consider the political and religious issues surrounding Sigismund's early reign which may have motivated him to make the commission when he did.

In short, this chapter will seek to answer two questions: why make such an expensive commission as tapestry, and why make the commission at this particular time? Because this thesis considers not only the agency of Sigismund as the patron but also of the viewers as co-agents in meaning-making, our timeline will cover events from the estimated start of the commission (January 1547) to the moment of unveiling (July 1553). In this way, we can understand the context in which Sigismund devised the commission, in which he continued to collaborate on it during the production process, and in which the viewer beheld the finished artworks at the wedding celebration.

1.1. The Medium of Princes

In the late 1540s, tapestry had an unquestioned reputation as the ultimate artistic expression of wealth and magnificence, with figural tapestry as the most expensive and coveted subgenre. This was largely due to the centuries-long patronage of tapestry workshops by the Burgundian court, and their continued propagation by the Habsburgs in particular. Tapestry's status as luxury art was not arbitrary, however; there was good reason for its exorbitant cost. The production of one piece was a multi-step and years-long process involving cartoonists, border artists, weavers, dyers, and merchants. Many of the tapestries in royal collections used gold thread, which could increase their price by up to ten times that of a standard wool-and-silk weaving.[106] Moreover, as delicate yet portable art, tapestries required considerable labour to maintain and transport, and so patrons had to have the means to keep a wardrobe as part of their household.[107] Thus, by virtue of their cost alone, tapestry was a prerogative of the highest societal echelon.[108]

Documentation on the financing of *Genesis* is very scarce, as Sigismund instructed his sister Anna to destroy all records of the commissioning process upon his death. Perhaps this was an attempt to conceal the truly exorbitant costs (and necessary loans) that had been necessary to fund such a project.[109] What we do know is that Sigismund took out a loan of 72 000 florins in 1560 from the Loitz bank in Gdańsk. On 1 January 1561, Sigismund wrote to his advisor Jacob Herbrot of Augsburg, stating that he owed 79 404 florins and 6 groschen for "certain jewels, as well as hangings woven in gold and silk," This sum was to be paid off in three annual instalments via lumber and wood products sent to Gdańsk from

[106] Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry,* 17; Bertrand, "A New Method," 37.
[107] Campbell, *Henry VIII,* 23.
[108] Ibid., 344.
[109] Jedzinskaitė-Kuizinienė, *Tapestries*, 20.

Polish-Lithuanian forests.[110] It is very likely that this is the same loan as the one taken out in 1560, with added interest. To put this amount in perspective, Sigismund loaned 100 000 thalers (approx. 119 000 florins) from the Loitz Bank for the Livonian War in 1559. Thus, at this point in his reign, Sigismund was spending about two-thirds of the cost of a military campaign on tapestries. To use another point of comparison, his annual income from Lithuania alone was 500 000 thalers (approx. 595 000 florins), and Catherine's dowry, excluding jewels, gowns, and silver ingots, totaled 100 000 florins.[111] *Genesis* was also an exorbitant expense compared to past tapestry commissions at Wawel, even taking inflation into account: in 1526, Bona Sforza ordered sixteen tapestries from Antwerp (without gold thread) measuring 200 cubits total (approx. 228.6 m) for only 205 florins and 10 groschen, while her husband's 1533 order of ninety-two heraldics from Bruges at around 1480 cubits (approx. 1691.6 m) totalled over 1170 florins.[112]

The 1560 loan is unlikely to have been equivalent to the cost of *Genesis*, as it was taken out over a decade after the start of the commissioning process and six years after the tapestries' delivery. However, we know that it took Sigismund much longer to pay off his 1559 tapestry debts than promised: in 1570, he still owed the Loitzes 29 317 florins and 6 groschen, including interest.[113] Considering that it took Sigismund over a decade to pay off 72 000 florins for unnamed tapestries, it is possible that some of the debts from *Genesis* may have carried over into the amount he loaned from the Loitzes a decade after he commissioned his first set.

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[110] Maria Hennel-Bernasikowa, *Dzieje arrasów króla Zygmunta Augusta* (Kraków : Zamek Królewski na Wawelu, 2011), 21-22, see also Ryszard Szmydki, "Kredytowe źródła finansowania tapiserii Zygmunta Augusta a ich wartość materialna w XVII wieku," *Barok* 17, no. 1 (2010): 13-19.
[111] Jedzinskaitė-Kuizinienė, *Tapestries*, 23-25; Małgorzata Duczmal, *Jagiellonowie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1996), 313.
[112]Jedzinskaitė-Kuizinienė, *Tapestries*, 19; Gębarowicz and Mańkowski, *Arrasy*, 182.
[113] Irena Kaniewska, *Księga ekspedycji kancelarii nadwornej 1559-1572: Materiały do dziejów dworu królewskiego* (Kraków: Historia Iagiellonica, 1997), 34.

The only other hint we have about the possible costs of Sigismund's tapestries comes from his contract with his tapestry merchant, Roderick Dermoyen, in 1559, in which Sigismund promises a sum of 12 000 florins for gold and silk tapestries.[114] Since we do not know which tapestries were included in this order, if they are even among the surviving collection at Wawel, or how many tapestries this amount covered, it is impossible to use this figure to estimate the cost of *Genesis*.

Notably, the wide-scale lumber campaign mentioned in the 1561 letter to Herbrot had been carried out since at least 1549: in other words, during the commissioning of the original *Genesis* set.[115] Historian Ryszard Szmydki has also noted that Sigismund was making money by selling agricultural products, especially grain, from Poland and Lithuania to the Low Countries starting around the same time (late 1540s).[116] It is likely that the sales of lumber and grain funded *Genesis* at least in part, but that Sigismund still had to borrow significant amounts which only accumulated over time as he acquired more and more tapestries.

Along with their inherent monetary value, tapestries were perhaps the medium best suited to a prince's propagandic needs. Often referred to as *fresques mobiles du Nord*, tapestries could serve the same function as giant frescoes of the Mediterranean (imposing size and physical beauty), but had the added value of portability. For itinerant northern courts, this meant that the most valuable pieces of a prince's art collection could accompany him wherever he went.[117] Much like his Habsburg counterparts, Sigismund was a

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[114] Hennel-Bernasikowa, *Dzieje arrasów*, 24.
[115] Ibid., 22.
[116] Ryszard Szmydki, "O jagiellońskich tapiseriach odzyskanych w Sztokholmie przez Zygmunta III (1566–1632)," *Kronika Zamkowa* 2, no. 42 (2001): 49.
[117] Edith Standen, "'The Twelve Ages of Man:' A Further Study of a Set of Early Sixteenth-Century Flemish Tapestries," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 2 (1969): 128.

peripatetic monarch who greatly benefited from the portability of his tapestry collection as he travelled within Poland-Lithuania.

In addition to furnishing royal homes, tapestries were most frequently used to adorn court ceremonies and festivities. Again, this was only possible due to their portability and flexibility in placement. Consequently, tapestry became the essential backdrop for any display of magnificence.[118] Unsurprisingly, therefore, Sigismund chose this medium for his wedding to a Habsburg princess. In his study of Henry VIII's tapestry collection, Thomas Campbell also notes that the highest quality and most extravagant tapestries were reserved for special occasions. These were typically large figural series woven with gold thread, of which the *Genesis* series is a prime example.[119]

Finally, tapestries were heirloom items of the highest calibre. While certain patrons such as Henry VIII did explicitly use tapestry to comment on current events, the expense and lavishness of these purchases meant that the artworks were intended to be reused for decades and even centuries to come. In this way, court tapestries were an index of dynastic and monarchical continuity—an association that may have been quite pertinent to Sigismund, given both his pedigree and his concerns over his lack of progeny. Indeed, we know that Sigismund viewed his entire tapestry collection as a core part of his legacy and the legacy of the Polish Crown. In his will, Sigismund left his tapestry collection to his three sisters and, after their deaths, "to the Kingdom of Poland and the Duchy of Lithuania as one Commonwealth."[120] Here, we see Sigismund's awareness of the importance of the

[118] Chipps Smith, "Portable Propaganda," 123, 127; Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 4, 23; Campbell, *Henry VIII*, 336.
[119] Campbell, *Henry VIII*, 340.
[120] "Te wszystkie *legata* Ich Mciam zapisane na Koronę Polską i na Księstwo Litewskie jako na jednę Rzeczpospolitą." Antoni Franaszek et al, ed., *Testament Zygmunta Augusta* (Kraków: PZS, 1975), 28.

collection to the Crown, even beyond his own dynasty, which he knew would end with his death.

By Sigismund Augustus's accession, tapestries (especially figural sets) were an expected fixture of any European court. At the time of Philip II's death, the combined Habsburg collection numbered around seven hundred pieces.[121] Henry VIII alone amassed around 2450 tapestries during his reign, although many of these were acquired as confiscated property.[122] At the start of the century, Popes Leo X and Clement VII had essentially revolutionised the tapestry medium through commissioning monumental tapestry cartoons by Raphael, copies of which would circulate across the major continental courts. Francis I and many Italian ruling families even set up their own weaving workshops to meet the demands of their commissions. With its long-standing history as the royal artistic medium of choice, surpassing painting and sculpture in the eyes of contemporaries, tapestry had become synonymous with royal power. If Sigismund Augustus wished to make a clear artistic statement of magnificence upon his accession, tapestry was the obvious choice that would be culturally legible by his peers.

A simple commission of existing designs, however, would not suffice. As the king of one of sixteenth century Europe's largest and most powerful polities, Sigismund would have to commission entirely new designs, an even more expensive and time-consuming project undertaken by only the top patrons. This is especially true if one follows the hypothesis of Piwocka and other Polish researchers: that all of Sigismund's biblical and verdure tapestries, as well as many of the grotesques and heraldics, were intended to form one gigantic series of at least 138 pieces. Evidence for this can be found in the nearly-identical borders of all of these tapestries, creating visual continuity, as well as the fact that

[121] Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry*, 101.
[122] Cambell, *Henry VIII*, ix.

the dimensions of many of these pieces were intended to fit within specific parts of Wawel Castle. As Carmen Cramer Niekrasz points out, the tapestry collection was a cohesive decorative programme intended to furnish an entire building, consisting not only of large wall hangings (like the *Genesis* series) but also of *portieres*, *entre-fenêtres*, friezes, and coverings for window arches, sills, and furniture.[123] Weavers' marks do also show that the pieces were produced within the same few workshops, and we do know that all of them arrived in Poland within around a decade. If one does consider these pieces to be one series, then it is the largest tapestry commission ever undertaken in early modern Europe.[124] Even if one rejects this hypothesis, however, commissioning so many custom designs that would comprise over half of Sigismund's entire collection by his death is a stand-out achievement among Renaissance tapestry patrons. By a certain metric, this would even surpass his father's remarkable 1533 commission of ninety-two heraldic pieces. Although these were all ordered simultaneously, there is no mention of these being original designs. In addition, figural tapestries such as *Genesis* were larger, had a higher cost per cubit (especially given the use of gold and silver thread), and were of a higher artistic echelon than heraldics or grotesques.

By the early 1550s, the Habsburg collection had solidified its primacy among others in Europe in terms of size through the *Conquest of Tunis* tapestries, which were around twenty-five percent larger than the average dimensions of figural pieces at the time. For the Habsburgs, size was a direct indicator of wealth, as few rooms would be big enough to house such a massive series.[125] The largest pieces in the Jagiellonian *Genesis* series have quite comparable dimensions to the other large figural series in the imperial collection. For

[123] Niekrasz, "Woven Theaters," 127.
[124] Piwocka, "Art of majesty," 406. In her doctoral dissertation, Carmen Cramer Niekrasz also posits this hypothesis, with a focus on the thematic continuity between the biblical and verdure tapestries.
[125] Hendrik J. Horn, *Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen, Painter of Charles V and his Conquest of Tunis: Paintings, Etchings, Drawings, Cartoons, and Tapestries* (Doornspijk: Davaco, 1989), 128.

example, Sigismund's largest pieces (*Paradise Bliss*, *The Building of the Ark, The Animals Enter the Ark, The Flood,* and *The Animals Exit the Ark*) have very similar dimensions to eminent series such as *The Honours, The Triumphs and Deeds of Scipio, The Story of Julius Caesar, The Battle of Pavia,* and *The Seven Deadly Sins*, and are slightly larger than pieces from *The Hunts of Maximilian* and *The Twelve Ages of Man*.[126] Consequently, in their size alone, the centrepiece tapestries in the *Genesis* series demanded the same attention as their imperial counterparts.

Sigismund's choice of workshops, border artists, and cartoonist enhanced his message of magnificence through the commission. The tapestries were woven in some of the most prolific and renowned workshops in Brussels, frequently patronised by other princes: namely, those of Willem and Jan de Kempeneer, Jan van Tieghem, and Pieter Coecke van Aelst. The Antwerp grotesque borders from the school of Cornelis Floris and Cornelis Bos were not only an appropriation of a new and fashionable artistic style, but also a relatively novel use of that style in tapestry borders. The earliest examples of engravings by Floris and Bos on which the borders were modelled date back to 1541, six years before the commission, making Sigismund's series a trendsetter in this regard.

As for the cartoonist, Michiel Coxcie had already made a career as the court painter of Mary of Hungary and the official city cartoon painter of Brussels, and had drawn cartoons for major Habsburg tapestry commissions such as the *Story of Abraham* and *The Story of Julius Caesar*.[127] Thus, by hiring Coxcie, Sigismund further underlined the link between himself and the Habsburgs: the family into which he was about to marry for the second time and to which he was related through his paternal grandmother, and a powerful

[126] Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance,* 139, 175, 297, 321, 329, 346, 383, 410.
[127] Piwocka, "Art of majesty," 402; Koenraad Jonckheere, *Michiel Coxcie and the Giants of His Age* (London: Harvey Miller, 2013), 33, 102.

yet mercurial neighbour of Poland-Lithuania. Notably, any perceived links between *Genesis* and the Habsburgs would not have been out-of-place at the late Jagiellonian court, which used much of the Spanish model of court behaviour and precedence.[128]

Fig. 3 Detail of Michiel Coxcie, *Self-Portrait as St. George*, c. 1575, oil on panel. Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten.

However, the Habsburg connection was not the only example which Sigismund might have been trying to emulate with his commission. More personally, he was continuing his family legacy as avid tapestry collectors in their own right. Panegyrics written after the 1518 wedding of Sigismund the Old and Bona Sforza (1494-1557) all describe the unveiling of sumptuous tapestries commissioned specifically for the event. By 1533, the couple had ordered one hundred more tapestries from Flanders, including ninety-two heraldics from Bruges and sixteen unidentified tapestries from Antwerp.[129] Sigismund the Old was personally involved in the design process of at least some of these: for one commission, he ordered not only *petit patrons* of the cartoons, but also two full tapestries to be sent to Kraków for inspection before the rest of them could be woven.[130] In fact, in

[128] Niekrasz, "Woven Theatres of Nature," 120..
[129] Agnieszka Bender, *Tapiserie w dawnej Rzeczypospolitej* (Lublin: KUL, 2004), 83; Jedzinskaitė-Kuizinienė, *Tapestries*, 19.
[130] Hennel-Bernasikowa, "Sprawa editio princeps," 101.

texts written about and for a young Sigismund Augustus, we see a particular emphasis on patronage, in emulation of his dynastic lineage, as a model for the King. For example, in Klemens Janicki's (1516-1543) poem for Sigismund's 1543 wedding to Elizabeth of Austria (1526-1545), the author urges him to "be loving in your guardianship of learned men…Because of them, the fame of your accomplishments will grow and live; because of them, your name will live through all eternity." Janicki notes that Sigismund's ancestor Jagiełło "was a great admirer of them [learned men]." Later, Janicki describes the devoted artistic patronage of Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund (Sigismund Augustus's great-great-grandfather) and ends his panegyric with this exhortation:

> "You are Sigismund Augustus by name; since these are the names by which you are known, honour those whose names you bear by your deeds. Be unto poets what he [Emperor Sigismund] was once upon a time, and do not think shameful what was so seemly to him."[131]

It is also worthy of note that Sigismund's maternal grandfather, Galeazzo Maria Sforza, had made a name for himself as an image-conscious patron of the arts, whose collections were renowned for their unrivalled magnificence.[132]

In sum, a Flemish tapestry commission would have been a calculated choice for the young king. As the luxury medium *par excellence*, it was a necessity for any European monarch to amass his own collection. Not only was tapestry a signifier of wealth and royalty, but it was a practical option for adorning an itinerant court, especially for ceremonies and festivals. For Sigismund personally, the medium drew notable connections both with his own dynasty and with the Habsburgs, the family into which he had married

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[131] Klemens Janicki, "Epitalamii serenissimo regi Poloniae domino Sigismundo Augusto," in *Carmina*, trans. Edwin Jedrkiewicz, ed. Jerzy Krókowski (1543, reis., Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1966), 212, in Segel, *Renaissance Culture*, 249.

[132] Marco Folin, *Courts and Courtly Arts in Renaissance Italy: Art, Culture, and Politics, 1395-1530* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors Club, 2011), 124; Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 98.

twice and with whom he was nebulously allied. Sigismund met the expected norms of tapestry patronage by choosing renowned Brussels workshops, but went above and beyond by commissioning *editiones principes* and choosing an innovative border style. In general, the commission would have introduced Sigismund onto the European monarchical stage as a learned, cultured, and cosmopolitan prince, whose artistic sensibilities were "most fully expressed through the commissioning of such things," in Stanisław Orzechowski's words.[133]

We may now turn to the second of our initial questions: why did Sigismund commission the *Genesis* series when he did? In order to answer this, we may begin by surveying other major tapestry commissions of the first half of the sixteenth century. Upon doing so, two common underlying motivations, often overlapping, emerge: the praise of magnificence in a time of stability, or the projection of an image of power in a time of turbulence.

1.2. The Strategies of Patronage

As a physical extension of the monarch's body, Sigismund's home and court had to reflect his glory and reputation. As Jill Burke explains, it was a theatre for material magnificence and a manifestation of power relations to one's domestic subjects and foreign visitors.[134] *Specula principum* stressed the need for rulers to project a magnificent image so as to discourage thoughts of rebellion.[135] The objects found in the court, such as artworks, had the power to convey messages, initiate dialogue, and institute or propagate symbolic allusions.[136]

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[133] Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 51.
[134] Jill Burke, "Florentine Art and the Public Good," in *Viewing Renaissance Art*, ed. Kim W. Woods, Carol M. Richardson, and Angeliki Lymberopoulou (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 71.
[135] Folin, *Courts and Courtly Arts*, 20.
[136] Lea R. Clark, *Collecting Art in the Italian Renaissance Court: Objects and Exchanges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 53.

During the first half of the sixteenth century, we see many examples of major ruling houses using tapestry to solidify a pre-existing image of magnificence. To name only a few, Charles V, Mary of Hungary, Cosimo de Medici, Francis I, and Popes Leo X and Clement VII used tapestry as the medium of choice for the glorification of their respective families or divine-right sovereignty.[137] To use one case study, Henry VIII accumulated tapestries for the purpose of self-glorification at the most secure moments of his reign, including his accession, his marriage to Katherine of Aragon, his sister Mary's marriage to Louis XII of France, and his meeting with Francis I at the Field of the Cloth of Gold. Some of his grandest spending on tapestries occurred during the late 1530s and 1540s, when he had secured "victory" over Roman Catholicism in his kingdom, had acquired millions of pounds from the dissolution of the monasteries, and had finally produced a male heir.[138]

On the other hand, there are many examples of these same rulers commissioning tapestries in moments when their grasp on power was most precarious. Returning to Henry, we find many purchases during the particularly turbulent early 1530s, which included his divorce from Katherine of Aragon, the split from Rome, his short-lived marriage to Anne Boleyn, and increasing concerns about the lack of a male heir. In fact, Campbell believes that some of these issues echoed in the subject matter of the commissions. For example, the *Seven Deadly Sins* series, received around the time of Anne Boleyn's execution, can be interpreted as the lament of a penitent sinner who had once been tempted by lust, greed, and witchcraft, but had subsequently returned to a righteous path.[139]

To take some other examples, Henry VIII's father, Henry VII, attempted to secure his highly-contested claim to the throne after his 1485 coup and establish himself as the

[137] Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry*, 99-100; Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 3-4.
[138] Campbell, *Henry VIII*, 78, 103, 116, 143, 251.
[139] Ibid., 203, 211, 224-226.

father of a new dynasty by commissioning tapestries.[140] Likewise, Leo X commissioned the *Acts of the Apostles* series by Raphael (a series that revolutionised the style of figurative tapestry and would become the most-copied set of all time) as a celebration of the papacy at a time when it was under threat by the concurrent rise of Lutheranism and of Turkish military power.[141] Meanwhile, Francis I's increasing italophilic propensities in his art collection may be seen as a compensation for his failure to acquire Italian territory after the Battle of Pavia. After returning from his captivity in Spain, Francis also intensified his tapestry commissioning in order to re-establish his magnificence. Notably, these included the first copies of Leo's *Acts of the Apostles* series and even of the Pope's state bed ensemble by Raphael. Perhaps these commissions served a twofold purpose: not only to convey his power after his captivity, but also to make a visual statement of his tenuous negotiation between papal alignment and the Reformation.[142]

In view of these two overarching motivations in many of the tapestry commissions of European monarchs, we may return to Sigismund Augustus's motivations for commissioning the *Genesis* series when he did, at the very onset of his kingship. In the case of Sigismund, there is certainly a case to be made for the tapestries as a celebratory series, ushering in a new leader of one of Europe's most powerful dynasties, and a happy marriage (at the time, he was married to his second wife, Barbara, a love match). This would fit with the overall image of Sigismund's court, especially in the first decade of his reign, as a theatre of extravagant pageants, tournaments, and ceremonies which would be remembered and emulated by subsequent monarchs.[143]

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[140] Ibid., 68.
[141] Ibid., 3.
[142] Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 270.
[143] Niekrasz, "Woven Theatres of Nature," 120.

Still, there is also evidence supporting the commission as the effort of a new ruler who, despite his wealth and pedigree, had inherited a precarious and potentially volatile political situation. Part of the reasons for Sigismund's predicament upon his accession rested on the limited nature of the Polish monarchy and its relationship with the nobility and the church. Beyond this, Sigismund also faced contemporary political and religious problems that threatened to upset the equilibrium between these three Estates, perhaps even leading to civil war. The possible thematic references to these issues in the tapestries will be discussed in Chapter Five. For now, we must consider the factors making Sigismund's rule so unstable, thereby creating the perfect moment for a commission to help establish his authority.

1.3. The King and the Nobility

1.3.1. The Nature of the Polish Monarchy

The king of Poland held ultimate executive, legislative, and judicial authority, although he was limited by certain privileges granted to the estates. Before his coronation, each king took an oath to be the protector of the laws and freedoms of his subjects. However, there was no exhaustive written codification of these laws and freedoms, leaving the door open for monarchs to interpret the oath in the most expedient manner if the need arose.[144] The king had the authority to appoint all of his regional, local, and court administrators, as well as senators (appointed for life), bishops, and councillors. In this way, the Jagiellons were able to staff most of the highest positions of power in the kingdom with their own supporters.[145]

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[144] Wacław Uruszczak, *Historia państwa i prawa polskiego*, 4th ed. (Alphen aan den Rijn: Wolters Kluwer, 2021), 144, 155.
[145] Urszula Borkowska, *Dynastia Jagiellonów w Polsce* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2011), 81.

However, in the legislative branch, the monarchy was quite dependent on a bicameral national representative assembly (*sejm*) established in 1493 consisting of the Senate and House of Deputies. The former was a body of one hundred and thirty-nine nobles (*szlachta*) and clergy appointed for life by the king, while the latter was a diet including around two hundred elected noble deputies representing provinces, as well as the senators. Sessions were called and mediated by the king, who theoretically possessed the right of veto, although exercising it would have been a potentially incendiary act.[146] Overall, the Polish monarchy was dependent on cooperation between the estates, although this was hindered by ongoing rifts between the magnates and middle and lower nobility, between the representatives of the Polish, Lithuanian, and Prussian provinces, and between the lay nobility and episcopate.[147] The *sejm* asserted its power to "elect" monarchs, although prior to 1573, this was not truly an "election" but rather a confirmation of the next heir in the Jagiellon family.[148]

Nearly a century before Sigismund Augustus acceded the throne, his grandfather Casimir IV enshrined the nature of the Polish monarchy and its relation to the other estates in several laws, including the 1454 Nieszawa Statutes. These included the requirement for the king to obtain the *szlachta*'s approval before passing laws, introducing new taxes, declaring war, or mobilising an army. On the other hand, the Statutes gave the king the authority to appoint bishops as well as lay offices, including voivodes and castellans. This allowed Casimir to construct a council, chancery, government, and episcopate that would be favourable to him. However, as Robert Frost notes, many historians see the Statutes'

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[146] Juliusz Bardach, *Dzieje sejmu polskiego* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, 2011), 43.

[147] Felicia Rosu, "Electing Kings with All Manner of Freedom: The Polish-Lithuanian Elective Monarchy in Context," in *The Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth: History, Memory, Legacy*, ed. Andrzej Chwalba and Krzysztof Zamorski, 179-194 (New York: Routledge, 2021), 182; Rosu, "Free from Obedience: Constitutional Expressions of the Right of Resistance in Early Modern Transylvania and Poland-Lithuania," *European History Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2017): 7.

[148] Jacek Jędruch, *Constitutions, Elections, and Legislatures of Poland, 1493-1993: A Guide to Their History* (New York: EJJ Books, 1998),, 29.

privileges to the *szlachta* as opening the door for potential political anarchy. In addition, Casimir's abuses of his privileges to surround himself with favourites, loyalists, and relatives while alienating critics led to a growing concern of the overextension of royal power, permeating all levels of the kingdom's provinces, and potentially clashing with the local and regional authority of the *szlachta*.[149]

This history set the groundwork for one of the most significant traditions in early modern Polish political thought: the "right of resistance" (*prawo oporu*), legally enshrined by the 1501 article of *De non praestanda oboedientia* by Alexander Jagiellon (1461-1506). Although the precise terms were somewhat vague and hotly debated, the decree stipulated that the nobility was at liberty to oppose the ruler and even seek foreign assistance for this purpose if these terms were violated by the king.[150] In 1505, the *Nihil novi* act outlined the legislative role of the *sejm* and prohibited the king from passing any laws without consent of the *szlachta*.[151] This effectively established what would become known as the "republic of nobles" and its immense legislative power alongside the monarch.[152] Taking all this into consideration, the position of the monarch over the nobility was fairly tenuous, and the legitimacy of rule and law derived mainly from the consensus of the *szlachta*.

1.3.2. Crown and *Szlachta* until 1553

During Sigismund Augustus's reign, arguably the most important political movement was the executionist movement (*ruch egzekucyjny*), that was spearheaded by members of the middle and lower *szlachta* from the 1560s onward. In general, the executionists viewed the Republic as separated into three governing bodies: the King, the

[149] Frost, *Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania*, 265, 269, 276.
[150] Bardach, *Dzieje sejmu*, 17.
[151] Wojciech Kriegseisen, *Between State and Church: Confessional Relations from Reformation to Enlightenment: Poland-Lithuania-Germany-Netherlands* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2016); Rosu, "Free from Obedience," 7.
[152] Bardach, *Dzieje sejmu*, 23.

Senate, and the House of Deputies, although they intended for the latter to hold the most authority. The movement aimed to strengthen the position of the lesser and middle nobility, revoke the illegal privileges of the magnates (e.g. by returning Crown lands "stolen" by magnates to the king), and curtail the power of the Church and (to a certain extent) the Crown. Although the executionist movement only became an active political force around 1560, its seeds were already germinating by the end of Sigismund the Old's rule, and would continue to manifest themselves during Sigismund Augustus's early *sejms*.

One of the earliest direct antecedents of the clashes between the *szlachta* and the king that would flare up in the mid-sixteenth century surrounded the first coronation of Sigismund Augustus in 1530. Sigismund the Old had his son elected co-regent (*vivente rege*), which contradicted the precedent that monarchical elections could be held only after a king's death. At the time, the *sejm* accepted the election, but passed a resolution forbidding *vivente rege* elections from happening again. In 1536, a clause was submitted to Sigismund the Old exempting all subjects from allegiance to the young heir unless he (Sigismund Augustus) reaffirmed all of the laws, privileges, and liberties ensured by previous kings upon their elections.[153]

Mere months later, the aforementioned "Chicken War" erupted: an organised rebellion of the *szlachta* against the Crown and magnates in response to decades of alleged financial corruption, administrative incompetence, manipulation of the law, and steps toward royal absolutism. Although the rebels did not achieve all of their demanded judicial and political reforms, they did successfully campaign for holding *sejms* in Piotrków and Kraków, for the King to execute the laws made by *sejms*, to publish no laws without the

[153] Rosu, "Free from Obedience," 7.

sejm's consent, and to legalise the attendance of all members of the gentry at subsequent royal elections.[154]

No other armed rebellion occurred throughout the remainder of Sigismund the Old's reign. Meanwhile, the co-regent Sigismund Augustus began his political fall from favour. Prior to his 1530 coronation, many nobles hoped that, unlike his ageing father and authoritarian mother, the prince would be a fresh new ruler who was open-minded to political and religious reform.[155] However, the bookish boy-king raised to be a humanistic virtuoso-prince sparked the ire of many magnates and nobles, one of whom received an ovation at the 1537 *sejm* upon denouncing Queen Bona for "having made the heir to the throne unfit to rule a nation of warriors."[156] Doubts circulated about Sigismund's commitment to his own kingdom, having been surrounded by Italian courtiers and tutors since birth and having maintained a close relationship with his Lutheran cousin, Duke Albrecht of Prussia (1490-1568). Then, Sigismund's move to Vilnius in 1544 upon his coronation as Grand Duke of Lithuania raised a new spectre that threatened the *szlachta*'s influence over the young king. His love affair with Barbara Radziwiłł (1520-1551), daughter of the most powerful magnate house in Lithuania, led to the increasing influence of her family, especially her brother Mikołaj "The Red" (1512-1584) and cousin Mikołaj "The Black" (1515-1565). Both men soon became inseparable friends with Sigismund. Many among the Polish *szlachta* feared that Sigismund had created "overmighty subjects" out of the Radziwiłłs. Moreover, his secret marriage to Barbara, a commoner and Sigismund's subject, prevented him from engineering a politically advantageous marriage

[154] Jędruch, *Constitutions*, 60; Bardach, *Dzieje sejmu*, 23.
[155] Frost, *Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania*, 440.
[156] James Miller, *The Nobility in Polish Renaissance Society, 1548-1572*, vol.1 (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1981), 13.

with another kingdom. The Grand Duke, meanwhile, spent most of his time in Vilnius, rarely coming to Kraków. This preference would continue until 1555.[157]

The judicial court system, while still in the hands of the Crown in 1547, was also a point of contention. Sigismund had inherited an enormous backlog of trial appeals to the *sejm* from his father's reign, and now faced proposals in his earliest *sejms* to separate the legislative and judicial systems in order to speed up the appeals process. However, the young king was not keen on limiting his royal prerogatives, in this or any other area.[158]

Thus, by Sigismund's first *sejm* as sole monarch in 1548, he was already a contentious figure, simultaneously viewed as a hope for political and religious reform, a weak-willed puppet of the Lithuanian magnates, a latent despot, and (perhaps the dominant view) an unpredictable and slippery character who had yet to show his true colours. At this *sejm*, the issue of Sigismund's marriage to Barbara and its implications for Polish-Lithuanian politics dominated the debates. The starost general of Wielkopolska, Andrzej Górka (1500-1551), gave a speech warning the King that the people of the kingdom of Poland were free, and could not be ruled by absolute power. He reminded the king that he was an elected monarch and the servant, not the master, of freedom, who was subject to the same laws as the other Estates. Certain members of the *szlachta* called for *rokosz* or dethronement.[159]

Here, however, was the first chance for Sigismund Augustus to demonstrate the patience and persistence that would characterise him as a ruler. While he complained of his subjects' brazenness to his cousin, Duke Albrecht Hohenzollern, he knew that Polish

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[157] Cynarski, *Zygmunt August*, 69.
[158] Felicia Rosu, "Monarch, Citizens, and the Law under Stefan Batory: The Legal Reform of 1578," in *Citizenship and Identity in a Multinational Commonwealth*, ed. Karin Friedrich and Barbara Pendzich (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 20-21.
[159] Frost, *Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania*, 440.

citizens had the legal right to denounce the monarch for breaking or manipulating the law. As Stanisław Orzechowski wrote, "We speak freely with our king, as with any other man."[160] Thus, while not taking public offence, Sigismund resolutely stood by his marriage and waited for tempers to cool, then brokered a deal with the episcopate to ensure her coronation in exchange for passing an edict which would punish heretics disrupting the public peace with *infamia*. Specifically, this entailed a loss of protection from the law and a ban on serving as a public official.[161]

Nevertheless, the incident had a lasting impact on the king's approach to the other Estates. He became more reliant on the counsel of the Radziwiłł cousins, especially after the trauma of Barbara's premature death from cancer in 1551. On several occasions between 1548 and 1553, he showed a disregard for statutes that concerned the *szlachta*: he distributed generous land leases without consulting the *sejm*, took out mortgages on Crown lands that would reach almost half a million *złotych* by 1562, and repeatedly called for raising taxes to replenish the depleted treasury. In the eyes of the King's opponents, the fears expressed at the 1548 *sejm* appeared to be coming true. Having cut his teeth in Lithuania, a duchy with more extensive prerogatives for its ruler, Sigismund had a more patrimonial approach to rule than the established limited monarchy in Poland. The middle and lower *szlachta*, who held their rights and liberties to be indelible and the foundation of the kingdom, resented the magnates and royal officials who benefited from the King's imperious wielding of the law. As the executionists gained in number and momentum,

[160] Stanisław Orzechowski, "Rozmowa albo dyjalog pierwszy około egzekucyjej polskiej korony," in *Stanisława*
Orzechowskiego polskie dialogi polityczne, ed. Jan Łoś (Kraków: Stanisław Kot, 1919), 78.

[161] Maciuszko, *Konfederacja Warszawska,* 64.

Sigismund was faced with an increasingly problematic position in Poland, and an increasingly unsettled and influential bloc in the *sejm*.[162]

On the other hand, the wedding to Catherine, planned toward the end of the *Genesis* commissioning process, was a chance to rectify some of the perceived mistakes Sigismund had made with his second marriage. Because of her dynastic pedigree and wealth, Catherine was one of the most advantageous matches Sigismund could have made in 1553. Moreover, as the daughter of Archduke Ferdinand (soon to be Emperor Ferdinand I), she carried with her the promise of a renewed alliance with the Habsburgs, a necessary partner for Poland-Lithuania's defences against the increasingly-expansionist Muscovy. Still, the Habsburgs hardly enjoyed unified support at the Polish court, especially those in Queen Mother Bona's anti-Habsburg faction. Moreover, Ferdinand had deposed Jan Zapolya (husband of Sigismund's sister Izabella) from the Hungarian throne, and Izabella was currently living in Poland while fighting for the restoration of her son, Jan Sigismund.[163] For all of these reasons, the Habsburgs were viewed as the enemy by many at Sigismund's court, including members of his most immediate family, which complicated the beneficial aspects of his new marital alliance.

1.4. The King and the Church

1.4.1. The Religious Milieu of Renaissance Poland

Catholicism had been the official religion of the Kingdom of Poland since 966. Because of the intertwining of church and state, the clergy and episcopate enjoyed special privileges, including in the Senate and in ecclesiastical jurisprudence.[164] However, Catholicism was not a strong majority religion across the region as a whole, even before

[162] Frost, *Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania*, 443-445.
[163] Sucheni-Grabowska, *Zygmunt August*, 323-325.
[164] Uruszczak, *Historia państwa*, 133.

1517. As Jerzy Kłoczowski points out, Christianity itself was relatively young in Renaissance Poland, and Lithuania had only been officially converted in the 1400s.[165] In Poland, there were large minorities of Eastern Orthodox, Jews, and Armenian Monophysites, and smaller minorities of Muslims and Utraquists, while the majority of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was Eastern Orthodox. During the Reformation, aside from Calvinists and Lutherans, the existing religious minorities were joined by communities of Bohemian Brethren, Anabaptists, Mennonites, and Antitrinitarians. Protestant ministers were legally recognised as members of the clerical Estate alongside Catholics and Eastern Orthodox.[166] By the end of the 1550s, one sixth of parishes in the kingdom were Protestant.[167] As Wacław Uruszczak explains, religious tolerance was one of the most important legal pillars of Jagiellonian Poland. It was defined as the freedom for (elite and urban) non-Catholics in territories held by the Polish Crown to practise their own faith, both individually and communally, without persecution.[168]

In order to rule such a religiously and ethnically heterogeneous population, the Jagiellons, presiding over the largest polity (territorially) in Europe with relatively decentralised power, had to adopt a policy of religious toleration by necessity. The monarchs had to find pragmatic solutions to theological disputes, make concessions when possible, exercise discipline with caution, tolerate dissenters, and moderate dialogue that would ideally lead to religious unification. The view of the prolific author and courtier Andrzej Krzycki (1482-1537), whose writings circulated widely at the court of Sigismund the Old, is perhaps exemplary of the prevailing attitude in the early Reformation: if Polish

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165 Jerzy Kłoczowski, *History of Polish Christianity*, 75.
166 Uruszczak, *Historia państwa*, 134.
167 Paul W. Knoll, "Religious Toleration in Sixteenth-Century Poland," in *Diversity and Dissent: Negotiating Religious Difference in Central Europe 1500-1800,* ed. Howard Louthan et al (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 41.
168 Uruszczak, *Historia państwa*, 131, 141.

Catholics had managed to coexist for centuries with Jews, Orthodox, Muslims, and Monophysites, then they could coexist with Lutherans.[169] This did not necessarily stem from any Enlightenment-esque commitment to religious liberty, but from the belief that religious concord was indispensable for political and social stability.

As the aforementioned irenicism of religious writers suggests, Erasmus's influence at the Polish court, episcopate, nobility, and intelligentsia cannot be understated. According to Wiktor Weintraub, "the spiritual climate of Poland was especially favourable for the diffusion of Erasmian ideas, which stressed Christian ethics and mutual understanding, and played down the importance of dogma and doctrinal difference."[170] Peter Bietenholz argues that Erasmus's calls for Christian unity in particular appealed to humanists in such a heterogeneous polity.[171] Reading, corresponding with, and visiting Erasmus in Basel was an "intellectual fashion statement," and his writings served as a kind of canon for church and state reform in Poland for others, Catholics and Protestants alike.[172]

The Reformation reached Poland quite early: in 1517, copies of the *Ninety-Five Theses* were already circulating in Prussian cities.[173] In fact, despite having a staunchly Catholic monarch, Sigismund the Old's Poland was a pioneering state in the early European Reformation. Specifically, in 1525, it became the first legally bi-confessional polity when it recognised its vassal, Ducal Prussia, as a Lutheran state with a Lutheran princely elector.[174] Ducal Prussia, Royal Prussia, and Wielkopolska became the centres of

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169 *Acta Tomiciana*, vol. 8, ed. Stanisław Górski. (Poznań: Merzbach, 1857), 251-252.
170 Weintraub, "Tolerance and Intolerance," 21-44.
171 Peter G. Bietenholz, "Concordia Christiana: Erasmus's Thought and the Polish Reality," *Erasmus Studies* 21, no. 1 (2001): 49, 59.
172 Louthan, "A Model for Christendom," 21. See also Ptaszyński, *Reformacja w Polsce a Dziedzictwo Erazma z Rotterdamu* (Warsaw: University of Warsaw Press, 2018); Konstanty Żantuan, "Erasmus and the Cracow Humanists: The Purchase of His Library by Łaski," *The Polish Review* 10, no. 2 (1965): 3-36.
173 Ptaszyński, "Between Marginalization and Orthodoxy," 1-29.
174 Natalia Nowakowska, *King Sigismund of Poland and Martin Luther* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7.

Lutheranism (and indeed, of the Polish Reformation in general) until the 1540s. From that point, the popularity of Calvinism among the southern nobility led Małopolska (the capital region) and, as of 1550, Lithuania to become the centres of Calvinism.[175]

Aside from the spread of Lutheranism through German-speaking urban populations in Ducal and Royal Prussia, the Polish Reformation occurred mainly in elite spheres. Its momentum derived much more from discourse at royal and noble courts and in intellectual circles (both secular and clerical) than in urban movements, and largely circumvented the peasant population. Barring one revolt in Gdańsk in 1525, it never took on a revolutionary character.[176]

In particular, the role of the magnates and *szlachta* (which itself made up roughly six to eight percent of the kingdom's population) in the Polish Reformation cannot be understated.[177] One bitter Catholic observer wrote in 1555 that "nearly all of the great families of Wielkopolska have joined the sectarians, and heretical leaders have been elected to the *sejm*."[178] According to recent scholarly estimations, approximately twenty-five percent of the *szlachta* left the Roman Church and joined a Protestant group during the Reformation.[179] The popularity of Protestantism among the nobility allowed the Reformation to move beyond the academies and into the political sphere, especially the royal court and *sejm*.

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[175] It should be noted that Lutheranism did attract some followers in Lithuania prior to this, and *sejm* records from the 1540s do show several anticlerical debates, e.g. on the removal of clergy from land courts and the removal of ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the nobility in secular legal cases. Gottfried Schramm, *Der polnische Adel,* 170-175.

[176] Kłoczowski, *History of Polish Christianity,* 92, 93, 100; Louthan, "Model for Christendom," 19.

[177] This statistic an estimated average across Poland-Lithuania, but the figure would have been much higher in, for example, Mazovia (25%, in some areas of the region, as high as 90%) and Podlasie (20%), but lower in the Lithuanian and Ruthenian palatinates (1-3%). Because a lack of sources makes it difficult to reach exact percentages of *szlachta* per region, these figures are under debate. See Felicia Rosu, *Elective Monarchy in Transylvania and Poland-Lithuania, 1569-1587* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 20.

[178] Schramm, *Der polnische Adel,* 102.

[179] Tetiana Shevchenko, "Hosius and Mohyla: Catholicism and Orthodoxy in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in Early Modern Times- A History of a Transcultural Reform Movement," *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa- Forschung* 60, no. 3 (2011): 325-377.

Two of the *szlachta*'s main religious grievances that shaped church-state politics in the sixteenth century were anticlericalism and antipapalism. The latter more directly influenced the relationship between nobility, Church, and Crown. The justification for Polish antipapism was often presented as loyalty to the King over the Bishop of Rome. Although the practice of Polish kings, bishops, and clergy swearing loyalty to Rome was a religious, not political act, it could have been (and was) interpreted as a contradiction to one of the core tenets of the Kingdom of Poland: the sovereignty of the Crown over all authorities, internal and external.[180] The *Codex iuris canonici* was seen as a foreign legal code at odds with Polish law, and loyalty to Rome was presented as treason against the Polish monarchy.[181]

Faced with this religious milieu, and having ruled as co-regent since the age of ten, Sigismund Augustus would have learned several important lessons from his father that he carried into his own policies. These included an aversion to the use of force, resistance to new religious groups only when they incited violence or posed a genuine political threat, wariness of the papacy, a commitment to irenicism, shrewd political manoeuvering between different confessional groups, and an attitude of pastoral stewardship over his subjects as a secular and spiritual ruler.

1.4.2. Sigismund and the Reformation

In 1548, the death of the old Catholic king propelled noble Protestants into public political action, as they saw the accession of his son Sigismund Augustus as a golden opportunity for a princely and magisterial Reformation. Although many nobles believed Sigismund to be weak and politically Janus-faced, all parties were well aware of his

[180] Uruszczak, *Historia państwa,* 143.
[181] Schramm, *Der polnische Adel*. 235.

reforming sympathies, and of the collection of heretics that he had already patronised at his court.[182]

When Sigismund became Grand Duke of Lithuania in 1544, he was able to experience the confessional diversity of Vilnius, which likely influenced his tolerant attitude toward other faiths. According to the Arian leader and historian Andrzej Lubieniecki (1551-1623), Sigismund's "country and court were populated by men who opposed the Holy See."[183] He filled his palace in Vilnius with Protestants: his court preachers, Jan of Koźmiń and Wawrzyniec "Discordia" of Przasnysz (1515-1566/9), had both been found guilty of heresy in the Kraków archdiocese. In 1547, Sigismund resisted pressure from the Archbishop to remove them, stating that he had never heard them preach anything worthy of condemnation.[184] When Sigismund returned to Kraków after his father's death, he brought along his preachers, who openly preached Protestant sermons.[185] Jan of Koźmiń also served as the royal librarian, along with the Reformed author Andrzej Trzecieski and his Protestant father.[186] In his library, Sigismund collected both Protestant and Catholic texts.[187] In 1550, Sigismund appointed the Calvinist Francesco Lismanini to be his theological advisor.[188] In the royal chancellery and secretariat, a collection of the sharpest minds at court, Sigismund was surrounded by some of the country's leading reformers.[189] He was perhaps closest to his secretary, Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, who dedicated his five-volume magnum opus, *De republica emendanda*, to the King. Of all

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[182] Ibid., 290.
[183] Andrzej Lubieniecki, *Poloneutychia*, eds. Alina Linda et al (Warsaw: PWN, 1982), 139-140.
[184] Schramm, *Der polnische Adel*. 290.
[185] Jobert, *Luther*, 34.
[186] Kras, "Religious Policy," 64; Katarzyna Meller, *"Noc przeszła, a dzień się przybliżył:" Studia o polskim piśmiennictwie reformacyjnym XVI wieku* (Poznań: UAM, 2004) 77-79.
[187] Cynarski, *Zygmunt August*, 93.
[188] Kriegseisen, *Between State and Church*, 365.
[189] Kriegseisen, *Between State and Church*, 365. The proportion of "heretics" appointed by Sigismund to the secretariat was so significant that it caused unrest among the Catholic senators and papal nuncios. Meller, *Noc Przeszła*, 75.

currents, Sigismund seemed closest to the Reformed Church: Lismanini reportedly read sections of Calvin's *Institutes* to him twice a week, and prepared his own commentary on the *Institutes* for him.[190] Sigismund also corresponded personally with Calvin and, in 1549, Calvin dedicated his *Commentarii in Epistolam ad Hebraeos* to the king.[191] While he remained a practising Catholic throughout his life, from an orthodox perspective, Sigismund certainly held some heretical beliefs. He was allegedly not a believer in prayers to the saints, purgatory, or clerical celibacy, insisted on taking communion *sub utraque*, and was suspicious of devotional superstitions. Moreover, like his father, Sigismund's relationship with Rome, particularly with Paul IV, and with the papal nuncios was turbulent, and seemed likely to break down completely on several occasions during his reign.[192]

For Polish Protestants, with Sigismund in power, the climate finally seemed favourable to launch a full-scale national Reformation. Overall, the 1550s became the apex of the Polish Reformation, a time in which reformers gained a significant foothold in government and the disorganised and disempowered Catholic episcopate struggled to maintain their political, ecclesiastical, and ideological power.

Although Sigismund's first *sejm* in 1548 was focused (fruitlessly) on the issue of his disputed marriage to Barbara Radziwiłł, the 1550 *sejm* became a battleground for religious issues in tandem with the ongoing marital scandal. Protestant delegates proposed their initial agenda to the king: to convene a national council, and to abolish ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the nobility. Meanwhile, the majority of noble delegates, regardless of confession, remained hostile toward the royal marriage, which drove a wedge between the

[190] Kriegseisen, *Between State and Church*. 365.
[191] Wilczek, *Polonia Reformata*, 25.
[192] Cynarski, *Zygmunt August*, 89-90.

szlachta and the King. Sigismund began to give way to paranoia, and even suspected the Protestant castellan of Poznan and one of the Radziwiłłs' strongest opponents, Andrzej Górka, of plotting with the Queen Mother to usurp the throne.[193] Seeing an opportunity to strengthen church-state relations, the bishops proposed a compromise to end the crisis: they would support Barbara's coronation if Sigismund passed an anti-heresy edict. Sigismund, aware of his precarious position and the necessity of strengthening his power base, and unwilling to dissolve his marriage, accepted. As noted above, in December 1550, five days after his wife's coronation, Sigismund introduced a decree that proven heretics would be punished with *infamia* if they disrupted public peace. As a result, many Protestants, including Sigismund's own court preachers, fled abroad or went into hiding.[194]

In her biography of Sigismund, Anna Sucheni-Grabowska argues that the edict was intended to be more preventative than repressive: it was aimed at stopping the further spread of heresy, but was not an attempt to eradicate heresy entirely. Rather, it was intended to protect domestic peace and avoid the kinds of violent unrest that had already erupted in neighbouring polities, and to gain the support of the episcopate for the Crown. Its content was far too vague and lenient to pose a significant threat to Protestant minorities, and could only potentially impact public leaders. Additionally, it made no mention of re-Catholicising Protestant churches or communities.[195] According to Agnieszka Januszek-Sieradzka, Sigismund was never interested in stamping out or even hindering Protestantism as a creed, but would not allow any religious movement to disrupt civil peace.[196] Wojciech Kriegseisen

[193] Jan Wijaczka, "The Reformation in Sixteenth Century Poland: A Success Story or Failure?" *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 17 (2015):" 13. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, at that same sejm, Sigismund agreed with the landed deputies that ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the nobility and their lands should be revoked, which was the first step toward the complete abolishment of this jurisdiction in 1557. (Kriegseisen, *Between State and Church,* 368.)
[194] Jobert, *Luther*. 36.
[195] Sucheni-Grabowska, *Zygmunt August,* 308-309.
[196] Januszek-Sieradzka, "W co wierzył Król Zygmunt August," 284

also notes that Sigismund wanted to curb the spread of the Reformation "which had started to undermine the power of the state authorities, and to reduce it to the religious sphere without attacking Catholic structures. He hoped that the Protestants would be able to reach a compromise with a reforming Catholic party."[197] Most importantly, however, the punishments dictated by the edict were never enforced.[198] The document was released *privatim* (i.e. unofficially) to the episcopate, but was never entered into law. In effect, the king successfully appeased the Catholic camp by masquerading as *defensor fidei*, but avoided taking tangible legal action against reformers.[199]

It would soon be apparent that this was Sigismund's preferred strategy for navigating the stormy waters of multiconfessionalism. Like his father, Sigismund was an irenicist at heart, and a firm believer in the power of a universal council to peacefully heal the schisms of Christendom.[200] Indeed, Sigismund's own concept of religious leadership emerged from the Jagiellonian traditions: rule without the use of force, achieved by fostering dialogue between opposing sides.[201] Gottfried Schramm even believes that Sigismund's "Catholicism" may have stemmed more from his commitment to the traditions and legacy of his dynasty, and that his concessions with reformers on adiaphoric matters such as clerical celibacy were ultimately aimed at restoring ecclesiastical unity. On a more pragmatic level, Schramm notes that Sigismund relied on the Church both for political and financial support, and so any definitive break from Catholicism might have proven disastrous for the decentralised monarchy.[202]

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[197] Kriegseisen, *Between Church and State*, 461.
[198] Kras, "Religious Policy," 67.
[199] Maciuszko, *Konfederacja Warszawska,* 63; Anna Sucheni-Grabowska, *Monarchia dwu ostatnich Jagiellonów a ruch egzekucyjny,* vol. 1 (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1974), 145.
[200] Kras, "Religious Policy," 59-60.
[201] Cynarski, *Zygmunt August*, 50.
[202] Schramm, *Der polnische Adel,* 295-296.

By the next sejm in 1552, the winds had changed for Protestants. In May 1551, Queen Barbara unexpectedly died, thereby removing the main source of conflict between the *szlachta* and the King. The door was open to establish a cooperation with the King with the ultimate aim of initiating a princely Reformation and creating a national Church. The 1552 *sejm* marked the beginning of a series of political successes for the Protestant camp. This was a kind of "lightning in a bottle" moment for the Polish Reformation, taking advantage of a ruler who was amenable to reform, before the aftermath of the Council of Trent and Catholic renewal could gain a solid foothold.[203]

Never before were the Protestants more outspoken than at the 1552 *sejm*. The delegates demanded that the King call a general assembly to resolve disputes between church and state authorities, repeated their appeals against abuses of clerical power, and criticised the King for acquiescing to episcopal pressure in 1550. In the end, Sigismund agreed to strip the ecclesiastical courts of their jurisdiction over the *szlachta* for twelve months, and to halt all ongoing cases. The interim would be extended at each subsequent *sejm* until this jurisdiction was permanently abolished in 1557.[204] However, in order not to cut the crown off from the financial support of the clergy and completely alienate himself from the bishops, Sigismund did not agree to abolish tithing.[205]

Considering the course of church-state relations around the time of his accession, Sigismund had good reason to project an image aligned with that of his father: namely, an image of a tolerant, irenic steward of all confessional groups in the kingdom. However, he also had to navigate between a staunch Catholic episcopate and an increasingly Protestant nobility. The former expected an orthodox *defensor fidei*, while the latter hoped for an

[203] Ibid., 291.
[204] Wijaczka, "The Reformation in Sixteenth Century Poland," 14; Kras, "Religious Policy," 68.
[205] Jobert, *Luther*. 68.

antipapal head of a Reformed national Church. Because the king was dependent on both the *szlachta* and the church for the security and legitimacy of his authority, Sigismund had to appease both sides. In 1568, the papal nuncio Giulio Ruggieri wrote that Sigismund "is not copious in words, rather secretive, cautious, and sceptical. In negotiation, he demonstrates unusual talent, yet in his answers he expresses himself so ambiguously...that it is easy to assume that he aims never to strip hope away from those with whom he fraternises."[206]

In fact, throughout his entire reign, Sigismund's confessional sympathies remained enigmatic even to his closest circle, which was a source of anxiety for Protestants and Catholics alike. While reformers placed their hopes for a national Church in him, the papal nuncios wrote panicked briefs about the King's possible conversion to Protestantism.[207] Some of his opponents saw him as a "wavering and indecisive ruler," who displayed a suspicious "lack of fervency and support" for Protestantism and Catholicism. In 1560, the papal nuncio Bernardo Bongiovanni (d. 1574) wrote that "the king is so good-hearted that he does not want to offend anyone. I would prefer that he were stricter in religious matters."[208]

However, to the more astute observer–and, indeed, to the majority of his contemporaries–Sigismund's master plan for religion in his kingdom was clear. He was admired above all for his prudence, wisdom, and patience. This is evident from the mottos on his medals, such as one from 1571, which reads: "with patience, I break the tough."[209] In the king's own words, "all things that move slowly and with good caution are useful, but

[206] Cynarski, *Zygmunt*, 97.
[207] Kras, "Religious Policy," 69.
[208] Cited in Bogucka, "Renesansowa władca a religia," 506.
[209] Cynarski, *Zygmunt August*, 97.

quick judgements can be harmful."[210] Sigismund knew how to navigate religion at his court, never firmly declaring himself for either side, and keeping both camps guessing as to his convictions. For example, Katarzyna Meller notes how his international "book-buying missions" may have been a shrewd political manoeuvre: by sending known Protestants on these trips, he distanced himself enough from them to assuage the fears of his Catholic senators, yet simultaneously relied on them to procure heretical texts and serve as his intermediaries in international reformed centres.[211] On another occasion, upon receiving a Lutheran prayer book from Albrecht Hohenzollern, Sigismund thanked his cousin, adding that he had to keep his views on the book private.[212]

Thus, we are left with an image of a devout king with a deep interest in theology, who never apostatised from the Roman Church, yet clearly respected and even admired certain reforming currents. Nevertheless, his decision to put domestic stability over his personal preferences indicates that he was aware of the political advantages of papal allegiance, and of the potentially disastrous effects of abandoning it. In Bongiovanni's words, the king "allowed everyone to live as he chose," believing that faith was an individual matter of conscience as long as it did not become a political nuisance.[213] He therefore sought to ensure security for reformers within Poland, and to take as many steps toward reform as possible without crossing a doctrinal Rubicon. In his leadership, he was guided by one core principle: just as his father had declared himself the king of both "goats and sheep," Sigismund told his subjects, "I am not the king of your consciences."[214]

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[210] Letter from Sigismund II Augustus to Jan Chodkiewicz, 1567, MNK no. 743, 103, Princes Czartoryski Library, Kraków, Poland.
[211] Meller, *Noc Przeszła*, 77.
[212] Januszek-Sieradzka, "W co wierzył Król Zygmunt August," 282.
[213] Cited in Januszek-Sieradzka, "W co wierzył Zygmunt August," 283.
[214] Cited in Joseph Lecler, *Toleration and the Reformation* (London: Longmans, 1960), 406.

1.5. Conclusion

To summarise, the nature of the sixteenth-century Polish state can perhaps be described as a triangular relationship between king, church, and nobility: a relationship in which trifold equilibrium had to be maintained in order to ensure a balance of power and peace in the polity. All three estates depended on one another for authority and legitimacy, yet all acted as buffers against one accumulating too much power over the others. The *szlachta* had privileges granted by the monarchy and had some autonomy from the church, yet were curtailed by monarchical authority and ecclesiastical jurisdiction. This ecclesiastical jurisdiction, alongside positions in the senate and royal council, kept the episcopate in power, although they were limited by the Crown's jurisdiction over the church and the constant struggle against the virulently anticlerical *szlachta.* The monarch held the highest position in this triangular relationship, aided by the power of appointments, veto, and ultimate authority in the legal system. Still, the Crown was dependent on the support and cooperation of the nobles and bishops, either of whom had the potential to cause political chaos and instability through dissidence.

Consequently, the newly-crowned Sigismund found himself at the head of a high-stakes balancing act which had become increasingly hazardous since his *vivente rege* coronation. Faced with a Church that doubted his confessional loyalties, a nobility that doubted his regnal competence, a dying dynasty, and a continent around him engulfed by religious conflict, it was necessary for the young king to make a bold, clear, and comprehensive statement of magnificence and acumen as early as possible, while taking care not to alienate any much-needed allies from his political and religious agenda.

This is the domestic historical context in which Sigismund undertook the commission of the *Genesis* tapestries, a necessary backdrop for understanding their didactic

content and impact on their patron and audience. Having established this, we may now consider another layer of the context of the commission: specifically, the implications of the genre and subject matter both at Sigismund's court and in the wider world of tapestry commissions across European courts.