



**I**n late medieval and Renaissance Europe dynastic and territorial unions were by no means a rarity. The exceptional character of the Commonwealth of Two Nations consisted in the fact that the Polish-Lithuanian political nation built joint institutions whose functioning for more than 200 years was based on such shared values as liberty, equality, recognition of the supremacy of the law, and participation in public life conceived as serving the common good – *res publica*. All these factors yielded an awareness of a political community which was the binding force of a federation, similarly to the high political culture of the gentry, who recognized the multi-cultural character of the state and society.

*Union of Lublin*, M. Bacciarelli, 1784  
Zamek Królewski w Warszawie

On the throne: King Zygmunt Augustus, next to him: royal secretary Stanisław Hozjusz with the act of the Union, to the right from the throne: Mikołaj Siemicki, marshal of the Chamber of Deputies. Polish and Lithuanian knights hold the flags of Lithuania (blue-green with the *Pogoń*) and the Crown (red with the Eagle) with laurel leaves, and the ribbon displaying the inscription: *In commune bonum - complexu sociata perenni* (for the common good – eternally united).

# Federalism in the History of Poland

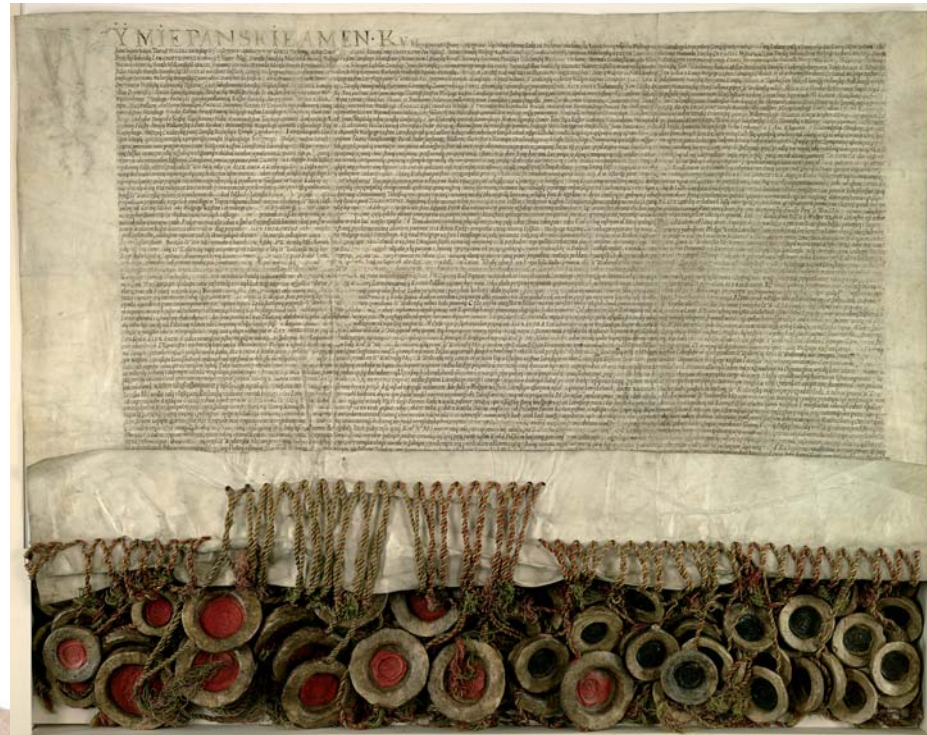
*The free with the free, the equal with the equal*

## The Commonwealth of Two Nations

*The Crown and Lithuania – United for all times...*

### Union of Poland and Lithuania

The Polish-Lithuanian Union was originally a personal union, which in 1569 assumed the form of a real union, i.e. a federation of two states. The Commonwealth of Two Nations was composed of two equal subjects: the Crown (Poland) and Lithuania. The state had a jointly elected monarch, who was simultaneously the Grand Duke of Lithuania, a joint Sejm (the Chamber of Deputies included parliamentarians from the Crown and Lithuania, and the Senate – Polish and Lithuanian senators, the marshal /speaker of the house/ of every third Sejm was a Lithuanian, and since 1673 every third Sejm sat in Grodno), and a joint foreign policy and currency. Separate ministers (hetman, chancellor, marshal of the court), treasuries, laws and courts were retained. A complete merge of the two states never took place: the Lithuanians consistently demonstrated their distinctness although under no circumstances did they seriously question the Union as such. Lithuanian parliamentary sessions were convened at the time of the debates of the General Sejm, and offices in Lithuania were held exclusively by Lithuanians, who also applied an increasingly wide interpretation of their competence in regard to foreign policy. Emphasis is due to the difference between the Lithuanian tradition of state continuum and historical consciousness and its Polish counterpart.



*Act of the Union of Lublin, 1569*  
Archiwum Głównie Akt Dawnych

The act of the Polish-Lithuanian Union was written down at the Sejm in Lublin in two identical documents dated 1 July 1569, which were then exchanged. The document of the Polish side features the seals of 140 senators and deputies of the Crown. The Lithuanians confirmed the credibility of their document with 77 seals. The latter document is kept in a Polish archive.

**1385** – the Union of Krewa; Jagiello, the grand duke of Lithuania, consented to becoming the King of Poland in return for marrying Jadwiga of Anjou, the Queen of Poland. Jagiello agreed to be baptised, to convert Lithuania to Christianity, and to join (*applicare*) Lithuania to the Crown. The ensuing union functioned on a personal basis.

**1401** – the Union of Wilno-Radom; a guarantee of the separateness of the Lithuanian state.

**1413** – the Union of Horodlo opened up for the Lithuanian gentry a path towards obtaining privileges similar to those enjoyed by the gentry in the Crown.

**1569** – the Union of Lublin; the creation of the Commonwealth of Two Nations.

**1658** – the Union of Hadziacz – an attempt at transforming the Polish-Lithuanian Union into a tripartite union encompassing three Ukrainian voivodeships (Kiev, Braclaw and Czernihów) – was never implemented.

**1768** – the enactment of the “cardinal laws”, confirming the immutable nature of the Polish-Lithuanian Union.

**1791** – the Third May Constitution introduced, beside a joint King and Sejm, also common executive organs of the two states, without specifying the character of the union of Poland and Lithuania.

**20 October 1791** – *The Mutual Guarantee of the Two Nations* – a Sejm act added to the Constitution, guaranteeing the equality of the Poles and the Lithuanians, and confirming the federal nature of the state.

**1795** – the third partition – the end of the Polish-Lithuanian state.



*Cartouches with the coats of arms of the Commonwealth – the Eagle and the Pogoń project of decorations for the Chamber of Senators at the Royal Castle, 1720, Zamek Królewski w Warszawie*



*The Zygunt Eagle and the beginning of the text of the Union act, 1 July 1569, Biblioteka Narodowa*

The lavishly embellished manuscript containing, i.a. copies of the Union documents of the Sejm of Lublin, was probably written within the range of the royal chancery.



*Map of Europe from the turn of the seventeenth century by H. Ilaior, Biblioteka Narodowa*

After the Union of Lublin the Polish-Lithuanian state covered an area of 815 000 square kilometres and attained its greatest extent in the first half of the 17th century. It was the largest country in the Latin-Christian Europe in the early modern period. The element of space played an important role in the history of the Commonwealth.

# L'État, c'est nous

## Liber civis...

**T**he *szlachta* – the gentry estate (the nobility) of Poland emerged from the knights in the second half of the fourteenth century. Due to the acquisition of successive economic, judicial and political privileges, during the first half of the fifteenth century the gentry changed into a civic nation, which decided about state issues by attending the dietines (sejmiki) and then the Sejm (the Diet, Parliament). Each member of the estate possessed identical political rights regardless of his property and religion (the principle of equality). The *szlachta* comprised about 10% of the whole population of the Polish Kingdom.



Portrait of Stanisław Jęczyński, T. Doiabella, ca. 1634  
Zamek Królewski na Wawelu

The youngest son of Jan, the voivode of Kraków, is shown wearing typical gentry apparel: a *zupan* (long inner garment) and a fur-lined *delia* (overcoat), with a *katabela* (sabre) at his side, and his hand resting on a book lying on a table covered with a Persian rug. This attire assimilated numerous Oriental elements, and in the eighteenth century a nobleman dressed in a *zupan* and a *kontusz* (long outer garment) was identified with a supporter of "golden liberty".



Privilege of Nieszawa, 1454  
Archiwum Państwowe w Krakowie

### Economic privileges

**1374** – the statute of Koszyce; an exemption of the gentry from all taxes with the exception of 2 *grosz* from each peasant *lan* (*laneus* – about 20 hectares); the statute contributed to the development of the land dietine, i.e. the representation of the gentry from a given land.

### Guarantees of civic liberties

**1422** – the privilege of Czerwińsk; a ban on the confiscation of land belonging to the gentry without a previous court verdict.

**1430-33** – the privilege of Jedlno-Kraków; the introduction of the personal inviolability of the gentry (*Neminem captivabimus nisi iure victum*).

### Political privileges

**1454** – the privileges of Nieszawa (granted to each land separately); the king could not issue new laws or order the *levée en masse* without the assent of the land dietines, i.e. the local assemblies of the gentry; the estate of the *szlachta* as a whole became an independent and legitimate political subject.

**1569** – the Union of Lublin extended all the privileges achieved previously by the gentry of the Crown so as to encompass the nobility of the whole Commonwealth.



*Winged rider*, a fragment of a painted parchment scroll depicting Sebastian Sobieski, the standard bearer of the Crown, leading a squadron of the royal *Hufaria* (Hussars), the famous winged cavalry painter unknown, 1605, Zamek Królewski w Włocławku

The winged rider is a personification of the conviction that every nobleman was a born warrior. A summary of the gentry duties *vixit & vixit* the king was contained in the succinct formula devised by Stanisław Orzechowski: "King, I owe you no more than 2 *grosz* from a *lan*, war, and a title on a summons". "War" signified the obligation to defend the homeland in a *levée en masse*, and "a title on a summons" – the recognition of the judicial rights of the monarch.

## ... in libera respublica

**S**ystem of the Commonwealth of Two Nations, whose main institutions were recorded in the Henrician Articles, was described as monarchia mixta, i.e. a combination of monarchic, aristocratic and democratic forms. Its foundation consisted of the idea of a social contract stemming from the conviction that the state had been created by the gentry as a whole, and that the will of the nation of the gentry was the source of monarchic authority. The obedience of the subjects relied on the observance by the king of the pledged rights. From the mid-seventeenth century the system of the Commonwealth found itself in a serious crisis.

Election of Augustus II the Strong in Wola  
M. Altomonte, 1697, Zamek Królewski w Warszawie

An election of the king by the whole gentry estate. During the first interregnum, after the extinction of the Jagiellon dynasty in 1572, the gentry party achieved the recognition of the principle that the monarch of the Commonwealth should be chosen in a free *virilium* election, i.e. personally by every member of the *szlachta* who arrived at the designated election site.



## Shaping of the principles of the Commonwealth system

**1493** – the beginning of the Polish parliamentary system; the first debates of the bicameral Sejm, composed of the representatives of the land dietines assembled in the Chamber of Deputies, the Royal Council (the Senate, in which membership was lifelong and not hereditary) and the king, whose competence included convoking the Sejm, heading the Senate, and the right to legislative initiative; the Sejm made decisions upon the basis of the consent of all three "parliamentary estates" (the king, the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies).

**1505** – the *Nilis novi* Constitution (a Sejm statute) prevented the king from enacting any law without the assent of the Senate and the deputies; the Sejm became the only legislative organ in the state; legal regulations analogous to the *Nilis novi* Constitution were subsequently included into successive Lithuanian statutes (1529, 1566, 1588).

**1573** – the Warsaw Confederation Act – passed at the time of the first *interregnum* and subsequently confirmed by every king chosen in a free election – guaranteed equal political rights and religious tolerance for the non-Catholics; the specificity of this act within the European

context of the period lay in the fact that it was not a royal edict but a document enacted by elected representatives of the gentry in the name of all the estates and territories of the Commonwealth. The Act did not create a new order, but confirmed the existing state of things.

**1573** – the Henrician Articles, a *sui generis* constitution of the Commonwealth, guaranteed the gentry all heretofore privileges, confirming the principle of the free *virium* election, i.e. an election of the king by votes cast by every member of the *szlachta* estate; the Articles also substantiated the principle of religious tolerance, obligated the king to summon the Sejm every two years, and introduced the institution of senators-residents (as the advisers of the monarch, obligated to present reports to the Sejm). The nobility was guaranteed the right to withdraw their loyalty to the king if he failed to observe the Articles or other laws.



Warsaw Confederation Act, 1573  
Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych

## Self-government of the gentry

The extensive land (voivodeship) self-government consisted of land and provincial dietines as well as courts and other land offices. The dietines functioned across the whole Commonwealth, and were a form of the direct participation of the gentry in public life. The dietines elected parliamentary representatives, candidates to the offices of land judges and judges to the tribunals, and made decisions indispensable for the implementation of Sejm constitutions. In the second half of the seventeenth century and during the early eighteenth century, at the time of the crisis of the central authorities, the dietines took upon themselves the burden of the actual administration of the state.

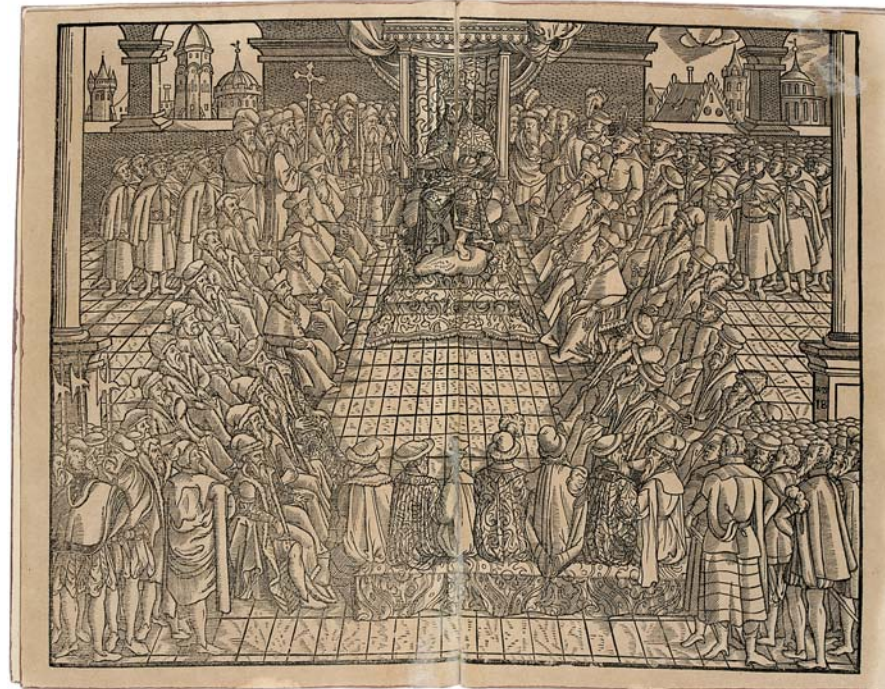


Confederation of Warsaw Formed in 1573 after the Death of Zygmunt Augustus  
Bracwo św. Łukasza / Brotherhood of St. Luke / (1925-1939)  
Muzeum Nadwiślańskie, Kazimierz Dolny

Since the almost two-year long *interregnum* after the death of the last Jagiellon, confederations (a reference to mediaeval unions created for the purpose of making claims or demanding that the ruler respect the law) became a particular form of the organisation of the state and political life in the Commonwealth, confirming the sovereign position of the gentry as a whole. They played a special role during the *interregnum* by introducing an essentially republican legal order, with the nation becoming the sole source of authority in the state and forming so-called *kapturowe* confederations (whose name was derived from the hoods worn during funeral ceremonies). The function of the *interrex* was fulfilled by the primate of Poland. The confederations, separate for the Crown and Lithuania, substituted for state authority and ensured law and order. All decisions were made by a majority of votes. Despite a ban proclaimed by the Third May Constitution the confederations survived until the end of the Commonwealth.

Dietine in Front of a Church in Środa Wielkopolska, steel engraving, J. N. Passini, 1857  
Biblioteka Narodowa

Churches were a permanent site for the gatherings of land, voivodeship and provincial dietines (during the sessions, however, they assumed secular features after the removal of the consecrated Host); in conducive weather conditions this function was fulfilled by church grounds. In Lithuania the debates were conducted in royal castles.



Polish Sejm during the Reign of Zygmunt Augustus, woodcut, M. Szarffenberg, 1578, Biblioteka Narodowa

Debates of the joint parliamentary chambers, whose composition stemmed from the provisions of the *Nilis novi* Constitution and the Union of Lublin. Legislative authority was wielded by the king together with the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies (the three "parliamentary estates"). In the Chamber of Deputies decisions were made by achieving consensus (which in the second half of the seventeenth century degenerated into the *liberum veto*). Executive authority belonged to the monarch but remained weak since he did not have at his disposal an expanded civil servant apparatus, especially in the provinces.

Senate Debates during the Union of Lublin  
etching, T. Treter, 1588, Muzeum Książąt Czartoryskich



Land Court, woodcut in the Sarnicki Statutes, 1594  
Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych

The judiciary was of an estate nature. In cases dealing with the gentry it was primarily the domain of the land courts (alongside the *starosta* and *sub-camerarius* courts). Appointments to the offices of the land judge, the *podplek* (*urbiudez*) and the scribe were made by the king, who chose among candidates suggested by the land dietines. Since 1523 the appeal instance was the king's court, and since 1578 – the Crown Tribunal (in 1581 a separate Lithuanian Tribunal was created). Judges to the tribunals were elected annually by the nobility gathered at the dietines. Court skills were obtained either by assisting the patron or while holding previous offices.



# Sovereignty of the law

## The law is the lord in a free kingdom

The foundation of the Commonwealth was law, binding both for the king and his subjects. Already from the time of the first Jagiellons the coronation oath and the confirmation of the law (*confirmatio iurium*) contained therein, which obligated the monarch to respect all the rights of the political nation, encompassed also a confirmation of the right to resist (*ius resistendi*) and comprised a formal expression of the supremacy of the law in the state:

Lex est Rex in Polonia et in Lithuania.

Aleksander the Jagiellon receives from Chancellor Jan Łaski a collection of laws (the Łaski Statute) 1506, Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych



# Constitutione

## Trzech Sejmów Koronnych.

Piotrkowski Roku 1562. przy nich Przywilej Incorporacyey y Uniey do Korony Ksiestw Oświęcimskiego y Zatorskiego.

Warszawski Roku 1563. przy nich Przywilej wthory Melioracyey y Incorporacyey y Uniey do Korony Ksiestw Oświęcimskiego y Zatorskiego.

Piotrkowski Roku 1565. przy nich o Składziach y starych Drogach Miasz Koronnych.

ANTONI ZYGMONT HELCEL



W Krakowie.

W Drukarni Mikotaja Szarsfbergiera. Roku 1565.

## Sovereignty of the law

*The law is the lord in a free kingdom*

### The supremacy of the law

**1505** – the *Nil novi* Constitution, requiring the enactment of universally binding law exclusively by the General Sejm, recognised the supremacy of the law over royal authority.

**1505** – the Sejm of Radom introduced the principle of the obligatory promulgation of the law in the Constitution *De constitutionibus novis per proclamationes publicandis* (On New Public Statutes Implemented by Official Announcements): the only binding law is the one which is properly announced.

### The execution of the law movement

**1562-1563** – reforms propounded by a movement of the middle gentry calling for the observation (also by the king) of old laws, i.e. the “execution of the law”, which was ultimately joined by King Zygmunt Augustus; the Sejm sitting in Piotrków resolved to return royal estates illegally seized by the magnates, prohibited the accumulation of several high offices by one person, and proclaimed religious tolerance for the nobility. The statute reinforced the position of the Chamber of Deputies at the cost of the Senate. The Sejm postulated a close union of all Jagiellon states.

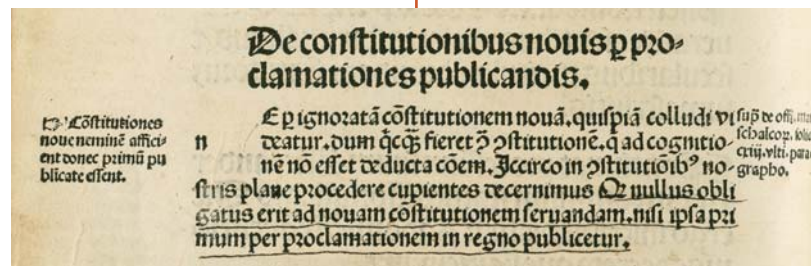
### The right to resist

**1573** – the Henrician Articles – the king bound by the law. An emphatic confirmation of the supremacy of the law in the Commonwealth was the right to resist royal authority. The Henrician Articles foresaw that in the case of the monarch violating their provisions or other laws, royal subjects would be released from the oath of loyalty to the ruler (*articulus de non praestanda oboedientia*).

### The codification movement

**1505** – the Sejm debating in Radom inaugurated a campaign of a codification of the law; its outcome was the Łaski Statute, which contained such principles as the prohibition of retroactive law, an imposition of the protection of suitably obtained rights, and individual liability for crimes. The Łaski Statute – similarly to successive codification projects: the correction of the law (1532), the collections by Jakub Przyłuski (1553), Jan Herburt (1563 and 1570), and Stanisław Sarnicki (1594) – is evidence of the high legal culture of the ruling elite of the period.

**1523** – *Formula processus*, a codification of procedural law, introduced the institution of the appeal.



Collective edition of the constitutions of the execution Sejms (1562/1563, 1563/1564 and 1565) Biblioteka Narodowa

The first collective edition of Sejm statutes published in Polish. This was a response to the enormous interest in the work performed by the Sejms, which accepted a majority of the reforms aiming at an improvement of the state.

*De constitutionibus novis*, 1505 Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych

“So that [...] no one would be obligated to observe the new constitution unless it is earlier officially announced.”



**1588** – the Third Lithuanian Statute, a codification of the court and public law of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, expressed the idea of a state whose objective was the protection of gentry liberties (it included, i.e. the Act of the Warsaw Confederation) and the observation of the law by all authorities. The Third Statute strongly emphasised the separateness of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Owing to its high legislation values, since 1614 a Polish translation of the Statute was put to auxiliary use in the Crown.



Title page of the Third Lithuanian Statute in Rubenian, 1588, Biblioteka Narodowa

# Civic political culture of the gentry nation

# Serving the Commonwealth

Since the sixteenth century the gentry society thought in the categories of *raison d'état*, which it regarded as the observation of the law, domestic peace, and the duty to defend the Commonwealth. The feeling of responsibility for the state was expressed in universal participation in the public debate and a conscious cultivation of civic virtues, and was connected with a self-limitation of own liberty, whose symptom was a voluntary raising of taxes. From the mid-sixteenth century the political culture of Poland assumed the nature of a civic participation culture, in which a prominent part was played by an awareness of the unity of the nation of the gentry.

Diary of the Sejm of Lublin, 1569  
Biblioteka Narodowa

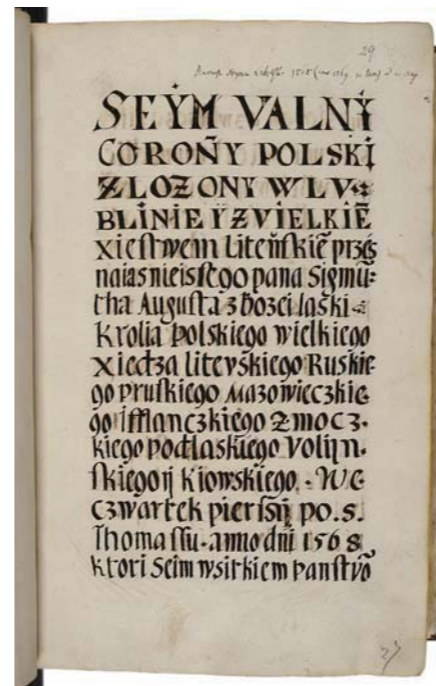
The Sejm diaries contained a day-by-day account of the debates held by the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. "[...] In libera republica it is fitting to enjoy *libera* voices, and we shall thus speak *libere* in front of Your Royal Majesty", a diary of the Sejm of 1555 recorded a statement made by Hieronim Ossoliński.

Print commemorating the revival of the Kraków Academy (later Jagiellonian University, originally established by King Kazimierz the Great in 1364) in 1400 by King Władysław Jagiełło and Queen Jadwiga, woodcut made in 1628 after a non-extant foundation painting. Zbiór Grafczny Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej

The Sejm of 1538 discussed the academies: "May His Royal Majesty together with Their Lordships, and especially the Clergy, be pleased to urgently consider that the sciences, and especially the Kraków and Poznań universities, be well governed [...]". The gentry stressed that the Crown was suffering unnecessary losses due to the fact that not only foreigners were no longer studying in Poland but the Poles were attending schools abroad. In 1579 King Stefan Batory founded the Wilno Academy upon the basis of the Jesuits *collegium*.

Parliamentary silva rerum, a copybook of Sejm material from the reign of Jan III (1674-1696) by A. Łasicki  
Biblioteka Narodowa

A *silva rerum* contained hand-copied documents of public life, for example, parliamentary and self-government material, and frequently fulfilled the function of a private archive, indispensable for every politically active citizen in the Commonwealth.



## Freedom of speech and freedom of religion

The several decades-long debate concerning the Warsaw Confederation Act was unique: more than a hundred prints and numerous manuscripts by the opponents and adherents of the Confederation have survived. One of the extremely important factors in the debate was pride in the specific relations prevailing in the Commonwealth. The Lithuanian Calvinist author of a brochure written in 1576 declared: "We are *gens libera*, a free nation. No supreme authority can *absolute dominari* a free people, to whom a king is never born and who hold his *libera electio*, or order us contrary to our rights and liberties [...]".

Piotr Skarga, the renowned Jesuit polemicist, wrote: "A confederation is evil, but worse still is war between neighbours in which both victory and defeat are evil ...".

## Concern for public affairs

*Dietine articles* and *populates* – motions accompanying the plenipotentiary rights granted to a deputy elected to the Sejm; the earliest postulates originate from 1508, and apart from economic demands and those referring to culture, the Church and education, the most numerous were the political postulates pertaining to legislation, the judicial system, the treasury, the status of the royal demesne, the activity of the offices, and, finally, the union with Lithuania and relations with neighbours. The purpose of an overwhelming majority of the postulates was to render the functioning of the state more effective.



## Nobleman-citizen

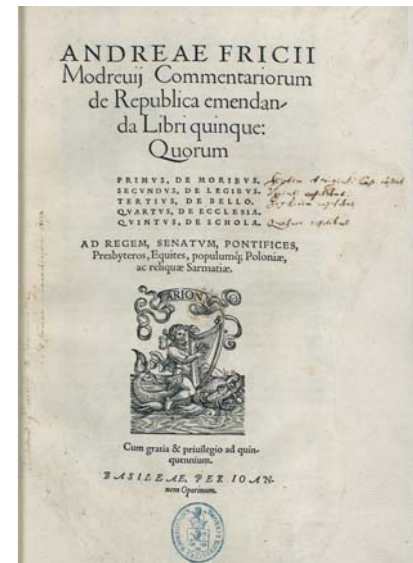
The personal model of a member of the gentry estate was the dietine orator. At the time of the "golden age" his characteristic features included tolerance and respect for political opponents, together with a belief that the welfare of the state was based on virtues and upright mores. A citizen of the Commonwealth addressed his peer, regardless of creed, origin and property, as "My Lord Brother". The principle of brotherhood comprised an essential argument in political discussions. Civic engagement was expressed in a universal holding of local offices: "a squire with no place is like a hound with no tail".

Dietine Scribe, drawing, J. P. Norblin, 1808  
Muzeum Narodowe, Poznań



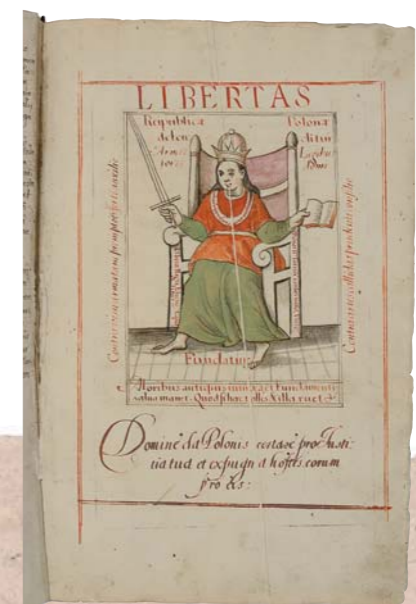
*De Republica emendanda* (On the Improvement of the Commonwealth) by Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski the title page of the Basel edition, 1554, Biblioteka Narodowa

Already during the first half of the sixteenth century the political writings of the gentry became an important element of public life. The topic of numerous publications were the principles of the system of the state and its reforms, e.g. *O naturze praw i dólbr królewskich* (On the Nature of Laws and Royal Estates, 1507) by Stanisław Zaborowski, *De Republica emendanda* (1551) by Andrzej Frycz-Modrzewski, *Dyalog albo rozmowa o kolo ogólnokrajowej Polskiej Korony* (Conversation or Dialogue on the Execution of the Law, 1563) by Stanisław Orzechowski, and *Reformacya obyczajow polskich* (The Reform of Polish Customs, 1650) by Szymon Starowolski.



*Allegory of the Liberty of the Commonwealth* drawing in: A. Lisiecki *Apologia* ..., 1625, Biblioteka Narodowa

Crowned Liberty on a throne wields a sword to defend herself from outside threats and uses law for protection at home. The gentry was aware of the political cost of liberty. Nonetheless, they universally agreed that it was worth paying this price since "uneasy liberty is better than peaceful servitude", and that it is possible to ensure justice only while remaining free.



# The Commonwealth of many nations, faiths and cultures



*Prayer of a Founder*, Muzeum w Lublinie  
Frescoes in the Byzantine-Rus' style, founded by Władysław Jagiełło, fill the interior of the Gothic chapel of the Holy Trinity in Lublin. Executed by a group of Ruthenian painters under Master Andrzej in 1418.

**T**he First Commonwealth was actually a Commonwealth of Many Nations, in which the rights of a political nation were due to the citizens, i.e. the gentry: Lithuanian, Polish, Byelorussian, Ukrainian, Prussian and Livonian - a truly polyethnic nation. This borderland country, which became known as an asylum for heretics, was inhabited by Catholics living alongside the Orthodox, the followers of Judaism and Islam and, subsequently, the Protestants. Geographically located along the abutment of two cultures - European and Oriental - the Commonwealth of the gentry benefited from both. The Orient influenced art, attire or weapons, the West - literature, architecture and science. Thanks to the Union, the Commonwealth became a melting pot of civilisations, in which elements of Oriental material culture merged into an entity with civic culture and praise of the rights of the individual. One of its symptoms was the Sarmatian ideology.



*View of the courtyard of the University of Wilno with the academic church of St. John Baptist and St. John the Evangelist*, 1849-1850

lithograph, Ph. Benoist and A. Bayot, Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie

The courtyard with a Baroque colonnade features three frescoes showing Stefan Batory, Piotr Skarga and one of the Śniadecki brothers. In the course of its general redesigning, the church, one of the earliest Christian sacral buildings in Lithuania, was granted a dynamic Rococo façade designed by Jan Krzysztof Glaubitz (completed in 1747).

# The Third May Constitution

*All power in civil society should be derived from the will of the people*



*Allegory of tolerance speaking to clergymen of various creeds*  
D. Chodowiecki, 1792, Biblioteka Narodowa

"I am not the king of your consciences" – declared Zygmunt Augustus. In the Commonwealth it was quite natural for people of various faiths to meet not only at the Sejm (which during a certain period featured an over-representation of dissidents) and the dietines, but also in social and family life. Zygmunt III Vasa, a zealous Catholic ruler, maintained cordial contacts with his sister Anna, an equally fervent Protestant, who arranged Protestant services to be celebrated at the Royal Castle.



*Rabbinic Court in Wilno*  
J. Krajewski, 1875, Biblioteka Sejmowa

Thanks to numerous privileges, the Jews in the Commonwealth gained a far-reaching autonomy. Apart from religious liberties they enjoyed also a guarantee of unhampered trade and financial-economic activity as well as self-government. The latter was based on the Kahal, i.e. a religious commune, independent as regards the cult, schools and, to a certain extent, also the courts. The so-called Waad, i.e. the Sejm of Four Lands, sar in the years 1580-1764, and a separate Sejm of the Lithuanian Jewry assembled since 1623.



*Coffin portrait of Bogusław Karcewski d. 1723*  
painter working in Greater Poland, oil on silver-plated copper tin  
Muzeum Okręgowo, Leszno

The coffin portrait – a realistic likeness of the deceased, painted on tin, usually six-sided and placed on a coffin – was associated with the lavish funeral ceremony typical for the Sarmatian Baroque culture. Similarly to many other phenomena this one too crossed religious divisions. The coffin portrait occurred among Catholics, Protestants and the faithful of the Eastern Rite Churches. The depicted Bogusław Karcewski, of the Samson coat of arms, was a Protestant and a member of the Unity of the Brethren (the Bohemian Brothers). Wearing a representative costume and with a fixed facial expression, he is shown standing between two worlds, an example of a typical Sarmatian coffin portrait.



*Kronika polska, litewska, z miedza i wszystkiej Rusi...* (Chronicle of Poland, Lithuania, Samogitia and All of Ruthenia) by Maciej Strykowski, 1582, Biblioteka Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego

During the Renaissance assorted nations created their national identities by inventing legends about their origin: the Poles thus supposedly descended from the Sarmatians, the French – from Troy, and the Lithuanians – from Palemon, an ancient Roman. Commissioned by Lithuanian Prince Olelkowicz, a poem about the Roman beginnings of the Lithuanian nation was written in Polish by the historian Maciej Strykowski.

**The Third May 1791 Constitution – the first written constitution in Europe. The Mutual Guarantee of the Two Nations of 20 October 1791, added to the Constitution, signified a final recognition of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a fundamental component of the Commonwealth, enjoying equal rights with the Crown; it was also a consolidation of the federal nature of the state.**

The eighteenth century witnessed an increasing crisis of the Commonwealth and the rising significance of her neighbours: Russia, Prussia and Austria, which to a growing extent intervened in the inner affairs of the Commonwealth. The first partition of the Commonwealth was carried out in 1772. Attempts at a systemic reform were made in 1788-1792 in a favourable international situation (the war between Russia and Turkey; the outbreak of the Revolution in France). The reform intended to render the functioning of the state organs more effective and to strengthen central authority, while retaining the foundations of republican gentry tradition and expanding some of institutions so that they would encompass also other estates. Its crowning accomplishment was the enactment by the Sejm of a constitution conceived as a fundamental act defining the principles of the state system. In May 1792 the opponents of the systemic changes formed the confederation of Targowica, supported by Russia, which ended in defeat in a war against Russia and thus led to another partition of the state. In 1795, after a failed insurrection headed by Tadeusz Kościuszko, Russia, Austria and Prussia conducted the third partition of the Commonwealth, liquidating the Polish-Lithuanian state.

The Third May Constitution based the functioning of the state upon the following principles:

- ❖ the sovereignty of the nation,
- ❖ the division of power into three branches: legislative authority – the Sejm (the Chamber of Deputies, which was to consist of the gentry, representatives of the towns, granted an advisory function, and the Senate), executive authority – a hereditary king together with ministers (Guardians of the Laws), and judicial authority (separated from legislative authority and the king),
- ❖ the parliamentary liability of the ministers: a two-thirds majority in both chambers enabled the Sejm to recall a minister for political reasons,
- ❖ the recognition and guarantee of civic rights – the equality of the gentry estate, the confirmation of all gentry privileges, and the expansion of the *naminiem captivabimus nisi iure victum* principle so that it would include also the townspeople,
- ❖ religious tolerance for all creeds.

Although formally the Third May Constitution confirmed the monarchic form of the state, its source of inspiration were republican values, it stemmed from the civic ethos of the gentry and reinforced the latter's status of a political nation which took an active part in wielding state authority (in the Sejm and the dietines).



*Allegory of the Third May Constitution*, D. Chodowiecki 1793, Biblioteka Narodowa

The Constitution, similarly to Liberty in Sarmatian tradition, is portrayed as a young queen wearing a crown and an ermine cloak. She unites the Crown and Lithuania by means of the coats of arms displayed on an obelisk.



*Enactment of the Constitution of 3 May 1791*, K. Wojniakowski, 1806  
Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie

The Sejm session on 3 May 1791. In the background, i.e. King Stanisław Augustus and two confederation marshals: of the Crown – Stanisław Nałęcz Małachowski, and of Lithuania – Kazimierz Nestor Sapieha.



*Medal struck on the occasion of the 3 May 1791 Constitution*  
J. G. Holtzhey, 1791, Biblioteka Sejmowa

The medal, cast in gold, was offered to King Stanisław Augustus by Amsterdam merchants as an expression of their recognition for the extraordinary feat.

