

The Courts of the Habsburgs as Related by Jakub Sobieski

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Introduction

Descriptions of European courts hold a key position in the accounts of early modern travellers. After all, in countries ruled by monarchs, particularly absolute monarchs, the court was the political centre of the state. Here all the most important decisions were made, not only regarding internal and foreign policy but also concerning the ruler's subjects and the fate of the old continent and the New World. Vienna, Paris, Rome, Madrid, Warsaw and London set the course of events in seventeenth-century Europe. Courts were also the focal point of the worlds of culture, art and science. Emperors, popes, kings, dukes, their families, court officials, ministers, advisers and diplomats were objects of interest to most travellers of those times. They appear on the pages of their accounts, memoirs, and diaries, just as they do on the canvases of the great baroque masters, not least the celebrated Velázquez.

The organisation and manner of functioning of European courts in the light of various historical sources is a subject which continues to interest scholars of various disciplines, especially in the humanities. As a result, the bibliography of this subject is extensive and rich. However, there remain certain issues that still require further historical study, analysis, and presentation to those who are interested.

In the present paper we would like to consider the image of Habsburg courts in the first half of the seventeenth century as recounted in the writings of Jakub Sobieski. We will look at how a subject of elected kings, a citizen of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and a magnate enjoying the extensive privileges and freedoms to which all Polish nobles were entitled perceived the absolutist courts of the Spanish and Austrian Habsburgs. And finally we will try to assess whether Jakub Sobieski's observations tell us anything new about this subject. But let us begin by taking a closer look at Jakub Sobieski, a historical figure who is not very well known among European scholars.

I. Jakub Sobieski (1590-1646) and his European travel accounts

Traveller, politician, writer and father of the victor of the battle of Vienna

For a long time the Sobieski family belonged to the moderately affluent class of nobility. Its ascension to greatness began at the turn of the seventeenth century, in the lifetime of the father of our traveller, Marek Sobieski. It was Marek Sobieski who put his family among the social, economic and political elite of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. He was the first in his family to hold a seat in the Senate. According to Władysław Syrokomla,¹ he was greatly valued by the kings Stefan Batory and Sigismund III Vasa, first as castellan and next as voivode of Lublin. Other reasons for the Sobieskis' status were their family connections (e. g. with the mighty Zamoyski family)² and their social contacts. His first wife was Jadwiga of Snopkowski family and the last child she bore him, in May 1590, was Jakub. Jakub died in Żółkiew in 1646.

Intellectual development and studies abroad

Placing great emphasis on education, Jakub's parents sent him, their youngest son, to study first at the Zamoyski Academy and then in Krakow. Next he spent almost six years, from April 1607 to March 1613, abroad. The young magnate not only studied but also learned the realities of contemporary Europe through travel. In that time he covered a distance of over 8,500 kilometres. He acquired his most essential education in Paris, learning the classical languages (Greek and Latin) as well as French and Spanish. He also took lessons in horse riding, fencing, music and dance. Józef Długosz, the publisher of Jakub's travel accounts, writes that unlike other magnate heirs, the young Sobieski was more interested in study and learning as much as he could from the places he visited. When he was not studying, he toured countries in western and southern Europe. He visited England, the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Italy and the Habsburg crown lands. Belonging to a magnate family and having excellent references provided him the opportunity to get to know the major political and cultural centres of Europe as well as the most eminent members of royal families and the aristocracy, and also prominent state and church officials. His interlocutors included Pope Paul V, Holy Roman Emperor Matthias, Henry IV of France, James I of England, Philip III of Spain, Maurice of Nassau, politicians, ministers, military commanders as well as important figures in science and culture (e. g. Julius Scaligier, Daniel Heinius, Juan de Mariana and Francisco Suárez).

Jakub Sobieski's career and distinctions

Sobieski's public service began soon after he returned from abroad. In 1613 he became a royal courtier and was for the first time elected deputy to the Sejm for the Lublin voivodeship, thus beginning a parliamentary career that was to span a quarter of a century. In that time he distinguished himself as a mover and shaker in politics, a speaker in the chamber of deputies, a member of parliamentary commissions, and an astute observer and brilliant orator, called in his day

‘the Polish Demosthenes’. Despite his considerable contributions and talent, his critical appraisal of court politics meant that he was never a royal favourite. For this reason too he did not acquire senatorial status until 1638, after being appointed voivode of Bełz. And only a few months before his death his career reached its pinnacle when he was made castellan of Krakow.

Another area of Jakub Sobieski’s public activity was his military service. He was in prince Władysław’s expedition to Moscow (1617-1618), holding the post of war commissioner, commanding a volunteer detachment, and participating in the unsuccessful storming of the Kremlin. Then in 1621 he fought the Turks at Chocim.

Furthermore, Jakub Sobieski distinguished himself as a diplomat. As royal commissioner, in 1619 he signed the Truce of Deulino. After the first battle of Chocim, he conducted peace talks with the Turks, meeting Sultan Othman II (1621). He represented Poland in the difficult peace negotiations with the Swedes at Altmark (1629) and later again at the Treaty of Stuhmsdorf (1635). In 1636 he was delegated to the international peace conference in Münster, which was supposed to end the war in Europe (later called the Thirty Years War). A year later, together with Władysław IV of Poland he greeted Archduchess Cecilia Renata of Habsburg in Warsaw, while in 1641 he spoke on behalf of the Polish Sejm to the papal nuncio Filonardi. Furthermore, he participated in negotiations with the Russian delegate Alexei Mikhailovich Lvov (1644).

Jakub Sobieski started a family when he was already an established and mature thirty-year-old. His first wife (married in 1620) was Marianna Wiśniowiecka, the daughter of the wealthy and influential voivode of Ruthenia Konstanty Wiśniowiecki. Sadly, his wife died after four years of marriage and their two daughters perished in early childhood. In 1627 Sobieski married his second wife, Zofia Theophila Danilewicz, daughter of the Ruthenian voivode Jan Danilewicz and heiress to vast landed estates. She bore Jakub seven children, three of whom survived to adulthood. The most important among them was Jan, born on 17 August 1629, the future King Jan III Sobieski, the vanquisher of the Turks at Vienna in 1683.

Jakub Sobieski willingly put pen to paper and thus let himself be known as a chronicler of a time when the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was at her greatest, and also as an educator of the younger generation. Being associated with the main areas of his activities, his writings varied considerably in terms of content and form. They included letters, memoirs, parliamentary speeches, and accounts of war (against the Turks and Russia)³ and peace negotiations (with the Swedes in 1629), and also extended to parliamentary diaries and accounts of his travels across Europe. The most important of his writings were published in Gdansk in 1646, including: his account of the Chocim War entitled *Comentariorum chotinensis belli libri tres*,⁴ the *Diary of the Coronation Sejm in Krakow in 1633*,⁵ as well as accounts of his travels, which I shall describe later.

Like many other young magnates in the early modern era, Jakub Sobieski liked travelling. Journeys provided him with the opportunity to meet new people and to experience new places and other cultural, religious and national realities. They enriched his knowledge, broadened his imagination and developed his aesthetic appreciation. As stated earlier, the years of his travels in western and southern Europe, 1607-1613, were the most important period in the development of his mentality and character. Thirty years later (in 1638), now an established politician and head of the Sobieski family, he accompanied King Władysław IV Vasa to a health spa in Baden (near Vienna),

during which time he visited imperial estates in Silesia, Bohemia and Austria. Let us also not forget that, albeit for a very different purpose, he also visited the Muscovite State.

Jakub Sobieski left behind accounts of his European travels. For many years they remained in manuscript form. They were first published by Edward Raczyński in 1833.⁶ Next, fragments of his account concerning Germany and France were published in French in 1846 by Leonard Chodzko.⁷ In 1879 part of Sobieski's accounts were published in Spanish by Fr. Feliks Rózański,⁸ the head of the San Lorenzo del Escorial Library near Madrid. However, the best full publication of his accounts, edited by Józef Długosz, was published in 1991 by the Wydawnictwo Ossolineum.⁹

Sobieski's accounts have not only been referred to by many Polish historians, but also by foreign ones such as Georges Cirot and Marcelin Défourneaux, the latter in his now classic *Daily Life in Spain in the Golden Age*. It is moreover worth noting that his travel accounts became the basis of a historical tale by Mieczysław Lepecki,¹⁰ entitled *Pan Jakobus Sobieski*.¹¹ The present investigation is based on the 1991 publication of this historical source.

II. The Habsburg courts

The term 'court' as understood by Jakub Sobieski

The key word in Jakub Sobieski's accounts is 'court'. The word appears in his texts very often, at various occasions and in various contexts. The most frequent cases are as follows:

1) *Court as the centre and capital of the state*. Setting out for Madrid in 1611, Sobieski writes: 'There is the capital and the place of residence of the Spanish kings.'¹² He has a similar reflection at the gates of Vienna: 'This is the finest city, a real *metropolis Austriae*. Residing there at the time was Matthias with his wife Anna.'¹³ For Sobieski, therefore, the state capital was the permanent place of residence of the monarch and his court. However, in his opinion the concepts 'royal court' and 'royal palace' were not synonymous. The royal court was Madrid, whereas El Pardo and Escorial were palaces. At El Pardo, Sobieski writes, 'there is a small royal palace of pleasure,'¹⁴ in other words a place of recreation; and the Escorial Palace is 'a secluded place for the royal court'.¹⁵ Sobieski similarly makes a distinction between the 'royal court' and the 'royal family'. Members of the monarch's (emperor's or king's) family were clearly distinguished from the larger community of the royal court: '[...] the emperor left Vienna together with his court and his wife, the empress'.¹⁶

2) *Court as a place*. Sobieski also uses the word 'court' in a different sense, as somewhere to be, a place for people to gather and meet, and as a journey's destination. One was in the court, at the court or with the court: 'Living in the court at the time was Prince Filiberto of Savoy [...]';¹⁷ 'The Spanish gentlemen were then residing with the court [...]';¹⁸ 'In that time he also lived at the imperial court [...]. Ordinary deputies also lived at the imperial court [...]'.¹⁹ One moreover arrived at the court: 'in that time he arrived at the Spanish court [...]'.²⁰

3) *Court as the ruler's circle and collective*. The court is made up of people forming a collective of very distinctive characteristics. It comprises the ruler's closest circle as well as his family.

With regard to the Spanish and imperial courts, Sobieski emphasised their size: ‘When I was in Madrid, the court was very large [...]’;²¹ ‘the imperial court [...] fairly populous’;²² ‘[...] Spaniards were added to his court [...]’;²³ ‘the emperor left Vienna together with his court.’²⁴

4) *Court as an institution*. Sobieski also perceived the court in the institutional sense, as a place where the ruler and officials formed the central administration of the state: ‘[...] at his court and throughout the kingdom he had his loyal clerks’;²⁵ ‘I encountered deputies at the Spanish court [...]’;²⁶ ‘they have their agents at the royal court [...]’;²⁷ ‘There are four seniors above the court as sort of marshals’.²⁸

For our Polish traveller the word ‘court’ was therefore a universal concept that he applied with respect to all the European monarchies. Naturally, depending on which state he was in he qualified it as the ‘French court’, ‘Spanish court’, ‘English Court’, ‘imperial court’ or ‘papal court’. Occasionally, as a synonym, he speaks of ‘the place of residence of kings’²⁹ or ‘the royal household’.³⁰

Distinctive features of the Habsburg court

What were the distinctive features of the Habsburg courts? What distinguished them from other European courts?

Firstly, these courts were characterised by their exceptionally close dynastic ties. In his accounts Jakub Sobieski frequently stresses the family ties between the Spanish rulers and the emperors. Already in the second sentence of his description of Madrid he states that at the royal court he saw Philip III and his wife Margaret, the daughter of Archduke Charles.³¹ Sobieski returned to the same theme in his description of how in 1638 King Władysław IV was greeted by the Empress Maria: ‘His Royal Highness spoke in Italian, and she received him quite pleasantly, speaking briefly in Spanish.’³²

On this occasion the Polish magnate allowed himself to make a few biting remarks about the proud and conceited Spanish royal, who during the ceremony of kissing her hand coolly received her Polish guests with *Hispanico fastu*, i.e. Spanish haughtiness.³³ These close ties between the two dynastic lines were apparent, as Sobieski notes, in the presence of Germans at the Madrid court and Spaniards at the Vienna court. As an example, the Polish traveller mentions Empress Maria’s housemistress, Madame ‘Girona’ [Girón].³⁴ This court official must have annoyed Sobieski, as in his accounts he writes she was ‘fiercely proud’ and never willing to allow Polish ladies to sit on the right-hand side of the Empress.³⁵ In his accounts Sobieski never uses the name ‘Habsburg’, referring instead to the ‘Rakuski House’ (from the Czech word *rakouski*, meaning Austrian).

Another characteristic element of Habsburg courts was their expanded ceremonial procedures and etiquette, which dictated relations between rulers, including their families, their subjects, and foreign guests.

A third important distinguishing feature of these courts was their close association with the Roman Catholic faith and religious practice. Sobieski emphasises the piety of Philip III and his wife Margaret.³⁶ In contrast to Henry IV of France,³⁷ the Polish traveller notes that the Spanish king ‘spent

his time on religious devotion' and willingly took part in religious processions. For example, he records that in the liturgical period from the feast of Corpus Christi to the Assumption 'every day the king publicly participated in church processions [...]'.³⁸ For this reason Sobieski was not surprised that Dominican and Franciscan confessors played such an important role at the courts of the Catholic monarchs.

The role of the ruler

What kind of rulers were the monarchs of Spain and the Holy Roman Empire? What roles did they perform at court?

It should be noted from the outset that Sobieski's comments on this subject reflected views he had acquired from the quite different political system of what was then the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, where the king was elected by the nobles. Moreover, in Poland the monarchy was not hereditary; even if a son happened to succeed his father,³⁹ it still required the approval of the noble estate or its parliamentary representation. The power of Polish kings was limited by a system of noble privileges (e.g., the so-called Henrician Articles and the *pacta conventa*) and freedoms guaranteed, since the Middle Ages, by the constitution of the Polish Sejm. Affiliated as he was with the powerful magnate dynasty of the Zamoyskis, Sobieski frequently disagreed with and openly criticised the policies of the Polish royal court, and even criticised the king. On account of these constitutional constraints, Polish monarchs were keenly interested in personally exercising what authority they had and, wherever possible, extending their range of responsibilities.

Meanwhile Sobieski notes the fact that neither Philip III nor Matthias I showed much interest in personal rule. Of the emperor he writes: 'A kindly man, but not very adept *ad res agendas* [in governing]'.⁴⁰ Whereas about the king of Spain he comments: 'More expert *ad vitam privatam* than *ad res gerendas* [in running affairs]'.⁴¹

Sobieski does not analyse the political systems of Spain or the Holy Roman Empire. However, perhaps having in mind the limited authority of Polish monarchs, he does remark that absolute monarchs also share their *potestas* with officials and ministers. Nevertheless, he also notes that while in the Commonwealth the participation of the nobility was laid down in the constitution, in the Habsburg monarchies it resulted from the personal decisions or the character traits of the ruler. Those ruling on their behalf thus included not only nominated officials, but also favourites and grey eminences. Imperial and royal favourites do feature in Sobieski's travel accounts. At the Spanish court he describes the Duke of Lerma as follows:

The king took him to heart and into his confidence so much so that during my stay in Spain he *rerum patiebatur* [held sway], after him the entire government, the *consilia* [or *Consejos*] and then the pretenders. Whomsoever he favoured, so did the king, whomsoever he disliked, the king disliked too. The whole of Spain adored him; the king showered him and his family and friends with gifts.⁴²

Matthias I Habsburg also had his favourites, whom Sobieski unequivocally calls his 'lovers'. In

this group he includes the bishop of Vienna and later cardinal Melchior Klesl, the Italian adviser Ottavio Cavriani as well as two military commanders, Siegfried Kollonich and Henri Duval Dampierre.⁴³

All these observations regarding the Habsburg courts and the roles played by the Habsburg monarchs inclined the Polish traveller to make some rather astonishing conclusions reflecting his surprise at encountering a situation quite different to what he had expected. He writes: 'It is strange that although there they have *absolutum dominium*, these monarchs do nothing without a council, they will not sign any public letter, or *sine consilio* they won't even touch upon *publicis negotiis*.'⁴⁴

Was Sobieski here expressing a conviction that Habsburg absolutism in Spain and the Holy Roman Empire, so much reviled by the anti-royal opposition in Poland, was a stereotype form of propaganda and manipulation? This would be going too far, but there can be no doubt that what he saw of the courts of absolute monarchs, particularly those of the Habsburgs, allowed Sobieski to conclude that even white had its shades.

Everyday life in seventeenth-century Habsburg courts

Spending some time in Madrid and subsequently in Vienna provided Sobieski with an excellent opportunity to observe everyday life in Habsburg courts. Naturally, these observations were rather general, as they were made from the outside. The young magnate paid particular attention to the official aspect of the life of the king and his entourage, that is to say, the court ceremonies (e.g. awarding the Order of the Golden Fleece) and audiences with ministers, foreign diplomats and high-born guests. For example, Sobieski witnessed Ambrosio Spinola being awarded the title of Grandee of Spain. Spinola would later become famous for his capture of Breda (1625), a scene which was immortalised by the brilliant Velázquez in his painting *Las lanzas*.

The Polish traveller devotes a lot of time to describing the way the monarch and his entourage spent their free time, and their forms of recreation. He noticed that this primarily depended on the monarch, whose preferences and tastes constituted guidelines for those responsible for organising royal or imperial entertainment. Sobieski recalls that the favourite pastimes of Philip III were hunting and riding. There was also much merriment at the Vienna court. To celebrate the arrival of Archduke Ferdinand and his family,⁴⁵ Emperor Matthias 'had various feasts and games organised for their delight'.⁴⁶ Later we learn that these included races, masks, ballet, theatre plays and hunting. Sobieski, however, records a negative aspect of recreation at the imperial court of Matthias I, namely, excessive drinking. Decades later, by contrast, on another visit to the imperial capital he was to comment: '[...] for they did not drink like the Germans did when I was in Vienna in Emperor Matthias' time.'⁴⁷

In describing the Habsburg courts, Sobieski concentrates more on their structure than on how they functioned. He is interested in their hierarchy of values, in relations between the ruler, his family, and the court, in the roles of particular individuals, in the network of family ties and in political, social, formal and informal relationships. Although he concentrates on the main players, he does also make an effort to understand the mechanisms behind the exercise of power. For example,

Sobieski notes that the most powerful aristocrats are given the highest offices of state and remain in the court. He explains this policy as follows: ‘He deliberately wants to have them together [...], so that they will not think of rebellion or factions, as they might if they were separated.’⁴⁸

The form and language of describing the court

There can be no doubt that in describing European courts Sobieski realised that they were the centres of political power in particular states: places where monarchs, their families, officials, ministers and diplomats convened, as well as others who were distinguished and important. In his descriptions he therefore takes care to write with appropriate precision, seriousness and respect.

On the other hand, he does occasionally cite opinions and rumours concerning particular court circles. During his stay in Madrid, he mentions the complicated situation of Philibert being the son of the duke of Savoy and at the same time the nephew of Philip III. Sobieski cites two explanations for Philibert’s presence in Madrid. Some reckoned this was due to his uncle’s concern for him and the intention to make Philibert viceroy of Portugal, while others believed he was being held as a sort of hostage, to keep his brother-in-law the Duke of Savoy in check. Sobieski adds that the young duke was discreetly watched over by Spanish guards as a kind of prisoner.⁴⁹ Let us also not forget that he did not refrain from writing about drunkenness at the court of Matthias I or from laughing at the gratuitous etiquette.

The language in his descriptions of the court is fundamentally different from that in the rest of his travel accounts. It includes far more examples of elevated and sophisticated phrases, court terminology, concepts associated with etiquette and ceremony, and Latin expressions.

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¹ Syrokomla 1854.

² For example, Marek Sobieski was made one of the legal guardians of the under-age Tomasz, son of Jan Zamoyski. See Witusik 2000, p. 729.

³ Jakub Sobieski is the author of the first Polish-language description of Moscow. See Malewska 1977, p. 140.

⁴ Syrokomla 1854.

⁵ *Diariusz sejmu koronacyjnego w Krakowie w 1633 roku*, 2008.

⁶ *Dwie podróże J. Sobieskiego, ojca króla Jana III...*, 1833.

⁷ Sobieski 1846.

⁸ Father Feliks Różański, see Makowiecki 1984.

⁹ Sobieski 1991.

¹⁰ Mieczysław Bogdan Lepecki (1897-1969), Polish Army officer, writer, journalist, traveller, in the years 1931-1935 adjutant of Marshal Józef Piłsudski.

¹¹ Lepecki 1970.

¹² Sobieski 1991, p. 142.

¹³ Sobieski 1991, p. 216.

¹⁴ Sobieski 1991, p. 148.

¹⁵ Sobieski 1991, p. 149.

¹⁶ Sobieski 1991, p. 217.

¹⁷ Sobieski 1991, p. 142.

¹⁸ Sobieski 1991, p. 144.

¹⁹ Sobieski 1991, p. 216.

²⁰ Sobieski 1991, p. 145.

²¹ Sobieski 1991, p. 146.

²² Sobieski 1991, p. 216.

²³ Sobieski 1991, p. 142.

²⁴ Sobieski 1991, p. 217.

²⁵ Sobieski 1991, p. 143.

²⁶ Sobieski 1991, p. 143.

²⁷ Sobieski 1991, p. 144.

²⁸ Sobieski 1991, p. 145.

²⁹ Sobieski 1991, p. 142.

³⁰ Sobieski 1991, p. 143.

³¹ Sobieski 1991, p. 142.

³² Sobieski 1991, p. 234.

³³ Sobieski 1991, p. 234-35.

³⁴ Inés Reynoso de Salamanca, the wife of Sancho Girón de Salcedo, Marquis de Sofraga, see: http://www.geneall.net/H/per_page.php?id=1599773. In the years 1630-1637 Sancho was 'presidente del Reino de Nueva Granada' (i.e. president of the *Real Audicencia* of Nueva Granada), see: <http://www.heraldaria.com/phorum5/read.php?3,4571>. Here his wife appears as Inés Rodríguez de Salamanca.

³⁵ Sobieski 1991, p. 244.

³⁶ Sobieski 1991, pp. 121 and 142.

³⁷ Sobieski 1991, p. 47.

³⁸ Sobieski 1991, p. 146.

³⁹ Such was the case with the Vasa dynasty. After the death of Zygmunt III, his son Władysław IV was made king, and he in turn was succeeded by his brother Jan II Kazimierz.

⁴⁰ Sobieski 1991, p. 216.

⁴¹ Sobieski 1991, p. 121.

⁴² Sobieski 1991, p. 121.

⁴³ Sobieski 1991, p. 216.

⁴⁴ Sobieski 1991, p. 145.

⁴⁵ Later Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand II.

⁴⁶ Sobieski 1991, p. 217.

⁴⁷ Sobieski 1991 (*Droga do Baden*), p. 235.

⁴⁸ Sobieski 1991, p. 145.

⁴⁹ Sobieski 1991, p. 142.