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REARMAMENT OF THE POLISH HUSSARS

under King Sigismund August(1548–1572)

Abstract

The process of transformation of hussar units from the light cavalry into medium armoured and then heavy cavalry is a complex phenomenon, requiring a comprehensive scholarly volume.

Plate elements, in the form of cuirass or only breastplates – typical of the heavy cavalry – could be observed in hussar units already in the 1530s. However, the loading down of the hussars with defensive armour intensified from the 1540s on, especially during the reign of King Sigismund August. The process of rearmament of the hussars into the heavy cavalry was evident as early as during the First Northern War (1558–1570). Written sources of various provenance from the times of King Sigismund August, in the form of the so-called permanent defence (Polish: *obrona potoczna*) registers, hetmans' laws and regulations for the army (the so-called hetman's articles), accounts of the kings (the Jagiellons and Habsburgs), poetic texts (i.e. a panegyric in praise of King Sigismund August by Stanisław Orzechowski), testify to the existence of hussar plate armour for both combat and tournament purposes. There is also the material evidence in the form of hussar weaponry from the time of the last Jagiellon, represented by scarce items in collections of Polish and foreign museums.

The reign of King Sigismund August has often been omitted as the period of hussars' weaponry transformation. Researchers tend to move smoothly from the light hussar units in the early sixteenth century to the time of King Stephen Báthory, which is incorrectly regarded as the moment when the armament and appearance of hussars took the final shape. In contrast, it was the period of the last Jagiellon that brought about profound changes in the hussarian weaponry. The medium hussar cavalry took on features of heavy cavalry and successfully replaced the mounted lancers knightly in character.