

Courtiers of Foreign Origin amongst the Horse Courtiers of King Sigismund I the Old in 1518–1526. Part One: Whether or Not, and How to Examine the National/ Ethnic Attachment of the Royal Courtiers?*

Keywords: Sigismund Jagiellon (1506–1548), royal court, horse courtiers, signature registers, ethnicity

Słowa kluczowe: Zygmunt I Stary (1506–1548), dwór królewski, dworzanie konni, rejestry popisowe, pochodzenie etniczne

Amongst numerous functions attributed to the royal court (leaving aside its definition in which — as has been repeatedly emphasised in various publications — it is difficult to find unambiguousness and unanimity¹), the least attention in research is probably given to its military and, particularly, the operational function. This is especially important because the military dimension in the functioning of the royal court is associated with the most numerous, the most representative and privileged group of the horse courtiers, who enjoyed the king's special trust.² As we know, the horse courtiers guarded the monarch, looked for accommodation during journeys, dealt with war compensations, recruited soldiers, acted as deputies, were legates at the assemblies, travelled with orders to the army, picked up taxes collected by tax collectors, or inspected royal estates.³ However, the attention is very rarely given to the horse courtiers in their original function — i.e. of a constant, well-trained military reserve of the regular army, which was at the king's disposal and which could be freely used by him.

* The article was written as part of the 2018/29/B/HS3/00907 project: “Polish Courtier at the Royal Courts of the Jagiellons and Elective Kings: Rank, Value System, Role Model” (“Dworzanin polski na dworze Jagiellonów i królów elekcyjnych. Pozycja, system wartości, wzorzec osobowy”), financed by the National Science Centre.

¹ Cf. i.e.: ASCH 1991, pp. 8–9; VALE 2004, pp. 20–25; SKIBNIEWSKA 2015, pp. 13–15.

² FERENC 2014, pp. 47–65; SKIBNIEWSKA 2015, pp. 68–74.

³ FERENC 2014, pp. 52–54.

The presence of the trabant guards at the court of Sigismund I remains an open question. The prevailing view in academic publications is that the military or combat role of the horse courtiers was limited during the reign of Sigismund the Old, when the royal guard was created, consisting of military trabant guards (also referred to as *stipatores*).⁴ Even though academic works have established a belief that the monarch had by his side infantry guards taking care of his safety, and Mieczysław Morka has written even about “several hundred” guards wearing the same uniforms at court ceremonies,⁵ A. Gładysz has demonstrated that there were no trabant guards at the royal court of Sigismund the Old and that the trabant formation emerged in 1537 at the royal court of young Sigismund Augustus, increasing its numbers over time,⁶ M. Ferenc’s research on the court of King Sigismund Augustus has shown that throughout the entire reign of the last monarch from the Jagiellonian dynasty service of the trabant guards was performed by 314 people while at the same time there were between 40 and 80 men by the king’s side. Their role was to constantly accompany the king and to take care of his safety also during military campaigns. They joined the fight when the monarch was personally on the battlefield and — as can be guessed — they were the ruler’s guarding unit which was, first and foremost, protecting the health and life of the king who was in command.⁷ As M. Ferenc has demonstrated, throughout the reign of Sigismund Augustus this formation was at its most numerous at the time of the 1557 Poswole military expedition, in which the king was personally taking part and was accompanied by 200 trabant guards.⁸ They were the only courtiers who performed military service, but their small number meant that their combat role on the battlefield had to be, inevitably, quite limited.

Its presence in the second half of the 16th century was noted by Marcin Kromer who stated that the king’s retinue included “the trabant guards [who] surround the king to provide for his safety, which is in fact a novelty in Poland, but adds a solemn gravity to the king’s figure.”⁹ Thus, it seems that military significance of the horse courtiers was never greatly diminished or taken over by the royal guards who were still perceived in the times of the last ruler of the Jagiellonian dynasty as the personal guards, not overly numerous and responsible for taking care of the king’s personal safety and splendour. Therefore, it should be assumed that at the court of Sigismund I the horse courtiers had to be the primary, the most important fighting force, which the monarch could freely use at also when he did not take part in military operations.

⁴ SKIBNIEWSKA 2015, pp. 69–70; FERENC 2014, pp. 67–73.

⁵ MORKA 2006, p. 188.

⁶ GŁADYSZ 2014b, pp. 68–69. The first reference to the trabant guards at the court of Sigismund Augustus is dated by M. Ferenc to 1543 (FERENC 2014, p. 67).

⁷ FERENC 2014, p. 69; cf. NAGIELSKI 1990, p. 65–69.

⁸ FERENC 2014, p. 68; cf. GŁADYSZ 2008, p. 90.

⁹ KROMER 1977, p. 128.

Due to the fact that the *curienses* performed other tasks on a daily basis — although not in isolation from their military training and skills — very little attention is given to their military role, which is understood as their participation in military operations. The achievements of Marek Plewczyński in the studies on the current perception and recognition of the role of the court troops in the entirety of military operations in the Jagiellonian monarchy are not to be overestimated; but apart from Marek Ferenc's article on the royal court of Sigismund Augustus,¹⁰ research done by Andrzej Gładysz on the royal court of Sigismund the Old,¹¹ and recently published article by Jędrzej T. Kałużny on the court's light cavalry at the end of the 15th century,¹² the topic has never been closely examined by historians. Probably with a significant loss for the image of the court reality. Even throughout the reign of Sigismund Augustus (1548–1572), the “non-militant ruler”, the participation of the horse courtiers in military operations — as was demonstrated by M. Ferenc — was not rare.¹³ The military significance of the horse courtiers is even more evident during the reign of Sigismund Augustus' predecessor, his father Sigismund I the Old (1506–1548). During the fighting over the northern and southern borders of the Kingdom, the monarch often used the court forces in the first half of the 16th century. The list of military operations in which the horse courtier detachments took part includes the Muscovite War of 1507–1508, Moldavian expedition in 1509, Tatar invasions in 1512 and 1516–1519, Muscovite Campaign of 1513–1514, Prussian War of 1519–1521, Turkish and Tartar invasions in 1524, Moldavian War in 1530–1538, and Muscovite War in 1534–1537, but it is worth remembering that the king used these forces also during the 1526 riots in Gdańsk.¹⁴ Undoubtedly, the horse courtiers of Sigismund the Old had a constant function in the theatre of war in the first half of the 16th century. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out straight away that due to their relatively small numbers the court forces had a limited significance in combat within the entirety of the armed forces used in military operations. However, we must not forget that these were the units of particular importance — well-trained, loyal and enjoying the king's trust.

The lack of research on the royal court of Sigismund the Old — we would like to say “broader research”, but we are probably in a situation where its lack is quite basic — puts the issue introduced in the title in a causative position, which is difficult to place in a wider context.¹⁵ Thanks to the accounts of Duke Sigismund Jagi-

¹⁰ FERENC 2003, pp. 99–117.

¹¹ GŁADYSZ 2011, pp. 93–103; GŁADYSZ 2014a, pp. 58–76; GŁADYSZ 2014b.

¹² KAŁUŻNY 2019, pp. 59–72.

¹³ FERENC 2014, pp. 94–95; FERENC 2003, pp. 100–104, 108–109.

¹⁴ PLEWCZYŃSKI 1988, pp. 45–46; GŁADYSZ 2014b, pp. 181–218; GŁADYSZ 2014a, *passim*.

¹⁵ The following short publication should be treated only as a signal of the issue of the foreigners' presence at the court of Sigismund the Old: SMOLUCHA 2002, pp. 347–352.

ellon published by Petr Kozák and Krisztina Rábai.¹⁶ our knowledge of this period of the ruler's life has increased significantly, but the problems regarding the military dimension of the royal court are yet to find their way into the orbit of research interests.

With regard to the reign of this Jagiellonian ruler in the Crown, we have, however, researchers who — due to their studies on the court of his predecessor, Alexander Jagiellon, and his successor, Sigismund Augustus as well as his wives¹⁷ — are not to be underestimated. Thus, in those — for now — small fragments under observation, we can make comparative references (obviously with all the reservations associated with comparative methods).

The sources in question — signature registers of the horse courtiers from the Central Archives of Historical Records (Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych)¹⁸ give us overall more than seven hundred cards — written partly in Latin and partly in Polish — with records devoted to... horses. Their titles leave no room for doubt. In these sources the horse courtiers are a kind of an addition to the horses described in great detail, with dates and places of displays, precise looks, characteristic features, brands drawn by writers, place, date, and circumstances of the animal's death, and the amount of compensation paid for it. The courtiers are present in these sources only as the owners of those meticulously described soliped creatures — only their names and surnames are recorded, sometimes also the offices they held instead of the personal data. It is worth noting — what is excellently clear in the analysed sources — that the horse courtiers' service was organised on the model of a social system used in the Polish army at that time, and the *aulices* joined the court together with the horse detachments, which were, however, not included in the court's structure, being subjected to and used by the courtiers. Paradoxically, this most numerous and the most important group of courtiers has a fairly pale reflection in the sources relating to the court's provenience. This has already been noticed by M. Ferenc in relation to the *Book of the Marshal* of the Sigismund Augustus' court,¹⁹ and it is thoroughly confirmed by the registers of the court's detachments from the previous period.

Even though these registers are rather discouraging at the first contact due to their schematic nature of a homogenous matter, they are — despite their disheartening semblances — a great source for getting to know the horse courtiers from the perspective of their realistic participation in military operations, places and time when detachments were enlisted in the royal service, number of individual oper-

¹⁶ KOZÁK 2014; RÁBAI 2014. Cf.: RÁBAI 2009, pp. 389–394; KOZÁK 2008, pp. 257–284; KOZÁK 2016, pp. 129–151; KOZÁK 2009, pp. 223–239; NABIALEK 2018, pp. 325–383. Cf. also the article by M. Ferenc in this volume.

¹⁷ MARCHWIŃSKA 2008.

¹⁸ AGAD, ASK, 85, cap. 13 and 14.

¹⁹ FERENC 2014, p. 51.

ations, means and circumstances of paying compensations. We deal here not with theoretical schemes or models of functioning of the court environment, which we are laboriously trying to build, but with noticing the actual activities revealing the actual mechanisms of the functioning of the court, and to be more precise — people who created it.

Findings regarding “national origin” of the courtiers or “nationalistic structure” of the court are a certain standard or an obligatory point in researching the royal court, but the matter strongly opposes the research. The difficulties have a few reasons. The surviving sources make it possible to precisely establish the origins of individual courtiers only to a small extent, while excellently documented cases of artists (architects, musicians) working for the royal court and fine craftsmen at their work (gardeners, tailors), who were clearly standing out due to their achievements, are rather exceptions confirming the rule. Secondly, determining who was a foreigner in 16th-century Poland poses a considerable problem. In society of the period the foreigner was becoming “one of us”, if he was living in the Crown, had his estates there, or acquired town privileges.²⁰ Examination of the process of “Polonisation” in every individual case — of frequently anonymous horse courtiers — is not possible. And the most important problem for these studies is the following how was “national origin” understood in the first half of the 16th century and who was, in that case, regarded as a foreigner? The issue is much more complex than it would seem from the delineation of borders in 16th-century Europe. This complicated problem can only be partially solved by the term “ethnicity”, which stems from the same core as “nation”, but can also be defined or set apart from the whole on the basis of the criterion of “foreignness”, “otherness”, and “exoticism”, on the basis of the juxtaposition of “familiarity” and “strangeness”.²¹

The identification, and sometimes even extended characteristics, of the horse courtiers presented in the analysed signature registers of the horse courtiers is possible on the basis of other sources, particularly of tax records, but the issue of the “foreignness” of the courtiers, including the horse courtiers, encounters not only obstacles in the sources, but primarily difficulties of definitional nature. It is not without a reason that the title refers to “courtiers of foreign origin” and not directly “foreigners” or “non-citizens”. This semantic caution is advisable and justified. While determining the origins — in the face of, usually, a lack of extensive source foundations for the majority of the royal courtiers — it is a norm to use the onomastic criterion or, more gracefully, the name criterion. There is no other tool and even this one is very unreliable, and its use is linked to a whole list of objections. The smallest number

²⁰ PLEWCZYŃSKI 1995b, pp. 10, 180; SKIBNIEWSKA 2015, p. 198.

²¹ POPIELARCZYK-PAŁĘGA 2018, pp. 16–17. More broadly cf. FENTON 2007. Some scholars — sociologists in particular — contest in general the validity of research and analyses of identities, also in the context of ethnicity and for the present period — cf. BIENKOWSKA-PTASZNIK 2007, pp. 324–333.

of doubts appear only when we look more closely into the “foreign origin” indicated by the surname, even though we will have to set aside the processes of “Polonisation” of people and their descent from the Crown’s territories, where the subjects had foreign names or the fact that a given surname belonged to a person who represented the next, properly Polish, generation of his family.²² More specific findings are possible for a small percentage of people who were classified in this way as having a “foreign” or “non-Polish” background, although we should start a separate discussion here on what this meant in the 16th century, since a “foreigner” was not only a non-citizen, but — as indicated by Marek Plewczyński — “foreignness” may have been determined also by attachment to land or even to county.²³ What is more, foreign surnames were frequently translated in the sources into Polish and thus “Hoffman” became “Dworzański” and “Wolf” became “Wilk”. As a result, our research lost two foreign courtiers, but acquired two Poles. With such small numbers which characterise the participation of the foreign horse courtiers at the court of Sigismund the Old, this has its own meaning.

The problem with distinguishing the group of horse courtiers of foreign descent from the collective stems also from a very narrow representation of those to whom this “foreign origin” could be attributed in the most numerous group of courtiers. We use numbers and percentages here, which — in my opinion — have no perceptible statistical impact on the shape and nature of the court. Studies by Józefa Skibniewska have shown that at the court of Alexander, where 42% of courtiers’ origins have been successfully identified, foreign background could be ascribed to 9%. However, it is worth noting that the foreigners were present, first and foremost, amongst the horse courtiers, which Skibniewska correctly explains by the fact that they were also mercenaries in the Crown’s army in most cases.²⁴ This is confirmed by research conducted by J.T. Kałużny, who has identified as many as 23 courtiers of foreign background amongst 60 courtiers recorded in an exemplary register from January 1500.²⁵ M. Ferenc’s research demonstrates that the royal court of Sigismund Augustus was in fact homogeneous in terms of nationality (if we accept “the Crown’s nature” or “Polishness” of this nationality²⁶). Participation of the courtiers of foreign

²² Cf. NAGIELSKI 1988, pp. 101–102.

²³ PLEWCZYŃSKI 1995b, p. 10.

²⁴ SKIBNIEWSKA 2015, pp. 198–199, 204.

²⁵ KAŁUŻNY 2019, p. 64, note 18.

²⁶ Lithuanians are seen as “ours” and not “the others” at the court of King Sigismund Augustus by Marek Ferenc, who does not include them amongst the foreigners (“a vast majority of Sigismund Augustus’ horse courtiers came from the territories of Poland and Lithuania”), although he simultaneously refers to them as “the most important group after the Poles at the court of the last Jagiellonian ruler”, suggesting their national autonomy. Amongst the 412 horse courtiers at the royal court of Sigismund Augustus, there were 52 from the Great Duchy of Lithuania, which constitutes 12,5 % of the horse courtiers. They are not included in the list of foreigners at the court of the last Jagiellon (FERENC 2002, pp. 355–364; FERENC 2014, p. 56; FERENC 2006, pp. 547–548). As M. Plewczyński rightly points

background is estimated at 5% and the percentage of foreigners amongst the horse courtiers was even more modest, only slightly exceeding 1% (five of 412 horse courtiers) or around 2%, if we include in the “foreigners’ group” also courtiers coming from families of foreign origin, but naturalised in Poland, i.e. the Boner or the Mniszech families.²⁷ It seems, therefore, that the shaping of the royal court during the reign of Sigismund the Old was the period in which a significant change took place in the category of the horse courtiers in terms of their ethnic background — from a rather diverse group in the times of Alexander Jagiellon to almost nationally homogenous during Sigismund Augustus’ reign.

Amongst more than nine hundred horse courtiers identified also on the basis of other sources, those of the foreign origin constituted — similarly to the court of Sigismund the Old’s predecessor, as well as his successor — a small percentage (around 10%).²⁸ In both analysed books courtiers of foreign origin constitute, according to the initial findings — and of course keeping in mind all the methodological limitations of such studies — around 19% and around 16% respectively. The results of research on the registers of the court’s detachments at the court of Sigismund the Old show that the recruitment of light-armed courtiers of foreign background was becoming more significant in the periods of intensified military operations. The representative heavy-armed courtiers were employed at royal court more often in times of stability and peace. The rather common belief in the substantial presence of foreigners at the Jagiellonian royal courts, including that of Sigismund the Old, most certainly has its own reasons, and in some parts of the court their presence was visible. Significantly, however, we are usually dealing here primarily with a few cases of people like architects, musicians, horse trainers or doctors, who stood above the average due to their unique, rare, specialised and highly valued skills.²⁹

The traditional aversion of the nobility towards a significant presence of “the others” in the king’s closest circle was most certainly of some importance for this statistically small presence of the courtiers of foreign background at the Jagiellonian court. However, it seems that this referred more to the influence of specific individuals gathered particularly around Queen Bona³⁰ than to a generalised dislike of a very low representation of people of foreign origin amongst the *aulices*. In a rather homoge-

out in regard to the military circles, even during the reign of the last Jagiellonian ruler “the Poles clearly felt their national autonomy in relation to the Lithuanians” (PLEWCZYŃSKI 1995a, p. 13).

²⁷ FERENC 2014, p. 56.

²⁸ GŁADYSZ 2014b, pp. 161–166.

²⁹ Cf.: FERENC 2014, p. 194; QUIRINI-POPŁAWSKA 1972, pp. 8–62, especially pp. 34–62, where data can be found on Italian physicians, apothecaries, horse trainers, goldsmiths, musicians, dancers, embroiderers, tailors, gardeners and craftsmen, but mainly those associated with the court of Queen Bona. The author indicates only several Italian horse courtiers of the king (*ibidem*, pp. 26–27).

³⁰ BOGUCKA 2004, pp. 90–96. A. Wyczański correctly observes that Italians who came over together with Bona were “a small group which was quickly merged with Polish society” (WYCZAŃSKI 1973, p. 71).

nous environment in terms of nationality (ethnicity) of Sigismund the Old's horse courtiers, individual representatives of foreign origin did not arouse antagonism — proven in the sources — of the representatives of the nobility who were looking for a chance at the royal court to make a name for themselves in the king's entourage and to pursue a political, military or financial career. This problem became more serious only during the reign of King Stephen Báthory, with the taking over of the Polish-Lithuanian throne by foreigners, and thus also with treatment of the House of Vasa.³¹ As has been emphasised by Mirosław Nagielski, together with the dislike of foreigners and foreignness, which was escalating amongst members of the Polish nobility from the 17th century onwards, the local assemblies' instructions demanded that the number of foreigners remaining at the royal court was limited and this claim was also a constant element in the *pacta conventa*.³² The foreigners in the court's army — who constituted a considerable combat force at least from the times of Stephen Báthory — were looked at with particular aversion. Already in 1576 the king appointed the royal guard which included one thousand-strong armed cavalry of husars.³³ Resolution written in the introductory letter — “we are constituting a new type of a regular army at our own court”³⁴ — states that the guards of Stephen Báthory was not a simple continuation or a development of a formation established by Sigismund the Old at least at the end of the 1530s at the court of his son. This thesis is reinforced by the fact that — as has been demonstrated by D. Kadzik — officers of this army did not come from the court circle; quite the contrary — the monarch employed people from outside of the court and the guards were a formation excluded from its structures; they functioned separately from it.³⁵ Thus the horse courtiers were not part of this army. Dozens of halberdiers known from the court of young Sigismund Augustus were undoubtedly a completely different trabant formation in its scale and role than the later royal equestrian guards.

No less important is the question of whether joining the court of the Polish king as a horse courtier was beneficial and attractive for foreigners. We know that the Jagiellonian rulers neither filled their whole courts with foreigners, nor did this with the most important — representative and military — part, i.e. horse courtiers. Did they not try? Did they want to? Were they not able to do it? It seems that service in the role of royal courtier was more attractive for local noblemen who in the closest circle of the king could increase their chances of acquiring a lucrative office, making a military or diplomatic career, finding a suitable candidate for a wife, and becoming part of the social elite of the kingdom. It should be assumed that if a potential candidate for royal service was wealthy enough to have a detachment at his disposal,

³¹ Cf. discussions on the “Jagiellon-Vasa dynasty”, SZPACZYŃSKI 2007, pp. 21–37.

³² NAGIELSKI 1985, pp. 549–550, 574–575.

³³ KADZIK 2017, pp. 10–11.

³⁴ SPIERALSKI, WIMMER 1961, pp. 41–43; KADZIK 2017, pp. 11–12.

³⁵ KADZIK 2017, p. 15.

it was more realistic, prospective and providing greater financial benefits to enlist in the Crown's army than to join court service. As has been demonstrated by Marek Plewczyński, the presence of almost thirty percent of soldiers of foreign background in the Crown's army distinctly affirms greater access and popularity of this career path, even though the anti-foreign legislation of the Crown did not encourage people to seek life opportunities by the side of the Polish king. Thus, it is not surprising that in comparison to the armies in other European countries the percentage of foreigners was relatively small.³⁶ What speaks in favour of service at the royal court is the fact that foreigners had an open path there to take the court's offices — their promotion depended on the individual decision of the monarch. However, this usually pertained to courtiers other than the horse courtiers who most frequently received — as is presented in the research on the royal courts of Alexander and Sigismund Augustus — the land and municipal offices,³⁷ inherently inaccessible to foreigners.³⁸

Current studies on the composition of the Jagiellonian courts indicate that research on the national or ethnic origins of the members of the court is not only wearisome and burdened with a considerable doze of hypothetical nature, but that the findings are also not a starting point for any research-relevant conclusions or further analyses. Apart from the conclusions of statistical nature, they usually make it possible to find an individual somehow rising above the average or, as luck would have it, was more visible in the sources, but those — otherwise interesting — examples usually exhaust the research questions posed in connection with the results regarding the ethnicity of the royal courts.

The sources examined in the present study indicate an overlooked path which would create a chance to say something new about the 16th-century court and present this court within its realistic activities, and not only in a statistical and static perspective. This real activity, which is clearly visible in the light of the sources under consideration, also makes it possible to indicate — as has been stated already — elements in the functioning of the court which not only falsify the theoretical structural models presenting a great plasticity and mobility of those structures, but they also reveal — Polish historiography concerning the courts is yet to coin an adequate term — functions which inter-structural, super-structural or go across those structures, functions which are difficult to fit in the models accepted in historiography of the court's organisation, division of roles or assigned tasks. They allow us to see it — let me refer to the concept I have already used³⁹ — as the court's microcosm vibrant with life and in this case vibrating also with horses' hooves, and not fitting into the frames in which we try to place it, or rather — lock it.

³⁶ PLEWCZYŃSKI 1995b, pp. 7–16, 190–204.

³⁷ FERENC 2014, p. 60; SKIBNIEWSKA 2015, pp. 217–229.

³⁸ SKWARCZYŃSKI 1931, p. 35; PLEWCZYŃSKI 1998, p. 9.

³⁹ JANUSZEK-SIERADZKA 2017.

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**Courtiers of Foreign Origin amongst the Horse Courtiers
of King Sigismund I the Old in 1518–1526.
Part One: Whether or Not, and How to Examine
the National/Ethnic Attachment of the Royal Courtiers?**

The service of horse courtiers was modelled on the system used in the Polish army at the time. The horse courtiers joined the court with horse detachments, which were not part of the court structure, but were subordinated to and served the courtiers. The analysed sources — 1518 displays of the horse courtier detachments of King Sigismund the Old (1506–1548) and register of changes until 1525 (Central Archives of Historical Records, Archives of the Crown Treasury, Section 85, no. 13 and 14) — are a valuable source of information about the horse courtiers in terms of their actual involvement in warfare, places and times of the detachments joining the royal service, numbers in the various military operations, ways and circumstances in which compensation was paid. However, the surviving sources tell us little about the precise origin of the various courtiers, and the well-documented cases of artists (architects, musicians) and fine craftsmen (gardeners, tailors) working for the royal court and standing out by virtue of their achievements are exceptions confirming the rule. Among the over nine hundred horse courtiers, identified also on the basis of other sources, those of foreign origin were a small minority (around 10%) at the courts of both Sigismund the Old's predecessor and his successor. In both analysed books courtiers of foreign origin made up, according to preliminary findings — obviously bearing in mind all methodological limitations of such research — around 19% and 16% respectively. Presumably, when it comes to the formation of the royal court, the reign of Sigismund the Old was a period in which a significant transformation happened in the ethnicity of the horse courtiers — from a fairly varied group during the reign of Alexander Jagiellon into a nationally almost uniform group during the reign of Sigismund Augustus.

