

THE BATTLE OF ORSHA

An explication of the arms, armour, costumes, accoutrements and other matters for consideration portrayed in the approximately contemporary painting of a battle fought in Byelorussia in 1514

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In the Gallery of the National Museum in Warsaw is displayed a battle scene painted with oils on panel, measuring 162 x 232 cm (5 ft. 3 3/4 in. x 7 ft. 7 3/8 in.), slightly trimmed on the top and on both sides but in general well preserved, without substantial damage or retouching. It represents the battle of Orsha (Polish *Orsza*), a town in Byelorussia on the Dnieper river, fought on 8 September 1514 between the allied forces of Poland and Lithuania on one side and the army of Vassili III, Grand Duke of Muscovy, on the other.

The history of this painting is sketchy. Probably it was executed in Cracow not very long after the battle. In the second half of the nineteenth century it appeared in the Museum Schlesischer Altertümer in Breslau and attracted the attention of German art historians, who correctly defined the subject and attributed the work to the German painter Jörg Breu, who died in 1537.¹ More modern opinion tends to place it nearer to the artistic ambience of Cranach the Elder, a view shared by the Polish monographers S. Herbst and M. Walicki, who liked to connect it with a certain anonymous master active in Poland and felt strongly that the composition was made immediately after the battle on a basis of eye-witness descriptions (more of this at the end of the present essay).² In the 1950's, art historian J. Bialostocki pointed out that the big cannon depicted in the foreground strongly resembles the one in the well-known Dürer etching *The Great Cannon*, which is signed and dated 1518 (p. 136). Bialostocki's conclusion was that the painter of the *Battle* did not have a real cannon as a model and therefore resorted to a readily available copy of the Dürer print.³ This stand was, however, soon attacked by arms historians. Zofia Stefanska, of the Polish Army Museum in Warsaw, made a detailed analysis of both representations and proved the superior accuracy of the Orsha version, concluding that it would have been easy to reconstruct the cannon in the print from the one in the painting, but impossible to paint so convincing and faithful an image basing it only on the print, which was neither exact nor explicit (in the painting, some parts are even shown war-worn!).⁴ Bialostocki did not relinquish his stand but rather clung to it tenaciously, unable to reconcile himself to the thought that the great Nuremberger could have borrowed any motif from a painting probably executed in Cracow!⁵

But apart from such interesting if circumscribed polemics, *The Battle of Orsha* has been insufficiently acknowledged by arms and armour historians outside Poland as the extraordinary source of information that in fact it is; and even within Poland the studies dedicated to it have been fragmentary and sporadic. Single *Orsha* figures and sometimes whole groups have been reproduced and discussed in various publications, but so far no attempt has been made at a comprehensive exegesis of the entire work. The present endeavour may be of aid in solving some of the problems posed by its seemingly arbitrary (but in fact, highly consequential) complexity; let us begin with a summary of the historical events that led up to its creation.

THE BATTLE OF ORSHA

The Grand Duchy of Lithuania, united with Poland in 1386 under the rule of the Jagiellons, comprised, besides the ethnic Lithuanian lands, vast Ruthenian and Russian territories conquered by the Lithuanian dukes in the course of the fourteenth century. This caused conflicts with Muscovy which, after its release from the Tartar yoke, embarked on a policy of uniting all lands populated by Ruthenian- and Russian-speaking peoples, and of trying to regain these from Lithuania. At first Poland did not take part in these conflicts, but eventually she did become involved during the reign of the Jagiellonian king Sigismund I. In July, 1514, a Muscovite army took Smolensk. In response, a great Polish-Lithuanian force marched out from the region of Wilna to reconquer the city. There were about 35,000 soldiers, consisting of 15,000 Lithuanian general levy, 17,000 mercenary Polish cavalry and infantry with large artillery, and 3,000 volunteer cavalry consisting of Polish magnates. The commander-in-chief of the allied forces was Duke Constantin Ostrogski, Hetman of Lithuania; his second-in-command was the Voivode Jerzy Radziwiłł, while the Polish troops were led by Janusz Swierczowski and Wojciech Sampolinski.⁶

The Muscovite forces, twice as numerous, were constituted in traditional fashion. Leaving a strong garrison in the fortress of Smolensk and in neighbouring castles, Grand Duke Vassili sent the main body to oppose the invaders, placing in command his equerry, Ivan Andreevitch Czeladnin, with Duke Mihail Golica and Grigori Fedorovitch Davidov, Governor of Pskov, as co-commanders. Czeladnin decided to give battle near Orsha, in the place where the Dnieper bends southward. In a first line, over a front of about three kilometers (1 4/5 miles), he deployed his detachment of the vanguard, which reached the river bank with its right wing; behind these stood, on both wings, the detachments of the extreme left and right, and between these the great main detachment; a rear-guard, entirely cavalry forces without artillery, waited in reserve on a rise.

The Polish-Lithuanian army was much more diversified. It consisted of various types of cavalry, infantry and artillery, and boasted skilled sappers and engineers disposing of entire trains of pontoons, so that by the night of 7 September the allied body had succeeded in crossing the Dnieper on two special bridges built on large barrels. Once over on the left bank, positions were taken up facing the enemy across the plain enclosed by the curving river; the disposition was the traditional old Polish array: two front detachments of cavalry flanking a part of the infantry, two main detachments of cavalry behind these, three detachments of light horse at each wing-end left and right, and the rest of the infantry and the artillery hidden in a wood near the extremity of the right wing.

Czeladnin's tactic was to outflank the enemy and then push him to the river, but this move led to a dangerous extension of his line. At about noon the front troops of the Polish-Lithuanian army started to move forward; and at the same time Czeladnin threw his detachment of the right hand, commanded by Duke Golica, against the Lithuanian light cavalry. This attack was repelled by a charge of the Polish armoured horsemen led by Sampolinski. The next attack, this time by the left-hand detachment of Muscovites, was also stopped, and then a feigned flight of the Lithuanian light horse led the pursuers under the fire of the big guns hidden in the wood. This precipitated first panic and retreat, then the dispersion of the Muscovites. Czeladnin was taken prisoner, together with several thousand of his

soldiers. In consequence of the victory, the Polish-Lithuanian army regained several castles, but was unable to reconquer Smolensk. Thus the strategic aims of the war were not achieved by the Polish-Lithuanian State. Nevertheless, Orsha proved valuable for political propaganda, especially in the difficult diplomatic game played by King Sigismund with Emperor Maximilian I. The most important Congress of the Jagiellons and Habsburgs took place in Vienna less than a year later, in 1515; an alliance and an agreement on spheres of interest of the two powerful dynasties were concluded. If it is true that the painting was brought to this assembly as a gift from king to emperor, with obvious propagandistic aims, then I am inclined to think that it had some effect upon the negotiations.

STRUCTURE OF THE PAINTING

As a painting, *The Battle of Orsha* is difficult to absorb; at first glance it gives the impression of chaos — only through patient, systematic examination, preceded by study of historical documentation, can one find deliberate order. The events are portrayed in simultaneous representation: successive episodes, often involving the same personages, are shown in one pictorial field without any indication of the passage of time, as in many works of the Italian Tre- and Quattrocento. The picture was meant to be read from right to left, in strips from top to bottom, and in some places from bottom to top. The viewpoint is aerial, and the resulting perspective is adhered to rigorously: figures and objects diminish towards the top, most sharply towards the top left corner. The battle is seen from the Polish side. Bialostocki rightly observed that the composition was based on the "subjective" or empirical perspective used by the Northern painters especially miniaturists, in the fifteenth century. This technique, unlike that of the Italian Quattrocento's perspective through abstract geometrical lines, reproduces forms as though reflected in a glass sphere, since it curves space and arches movements.⁷ The bottom of the painting is bordered by the Dnieper river seen from the north-west, flowing southward, parallel to the right edge of the panel in the direction of the top right corner. In this way the whole battlefield encompassed by the river bend was correctly determined. The field, with a long gorge, is sandy and overgrown with thin spruce; its colours are those of early autumn.

Perhaps the most striking peculiarity of this picture is its teeming population, which is almost enough to make the viewer dizzy. But study has revealed the involvement of an unexpected rule: in some parts a definite number module applies, many separate groups of figures numbering seven or its multiple, while some other quantities are also systematically repeated. This is probably not fortuitous: the Renaissance cult of numbers and their magic was, it would seem, familiar to our author, who may have sought to overcome by means of numbers the space limitations of the panel on which he intended to render faithfully a raging battle.

In the description that follows, the painting has been divided into four Sections and forty-six Scenes. Most of the latter depict entire events or situations, but some are only close-ups of figures to facilitate examination of, and commentary on, certain features. An appendix of drawings is included at the end of the article to further facilitate examination of details. Each illustration is cross-referenced in the text for identification.





Overall view of The Battle of Orsha, fought in Byelorussia on the Dnieper river on 8 September 1514 between the allied forces of Poland and Lithuania on one side and the army of Vassili III, Grand Duke of Muskovy,

on the other; recorded by an unidentified artist not long after the event. Painted on wood, the work measures 162 x 232 cm. = approx. 5 ft. 4 in. x 7 ft. 8 in. (National Museum, Warsaw)

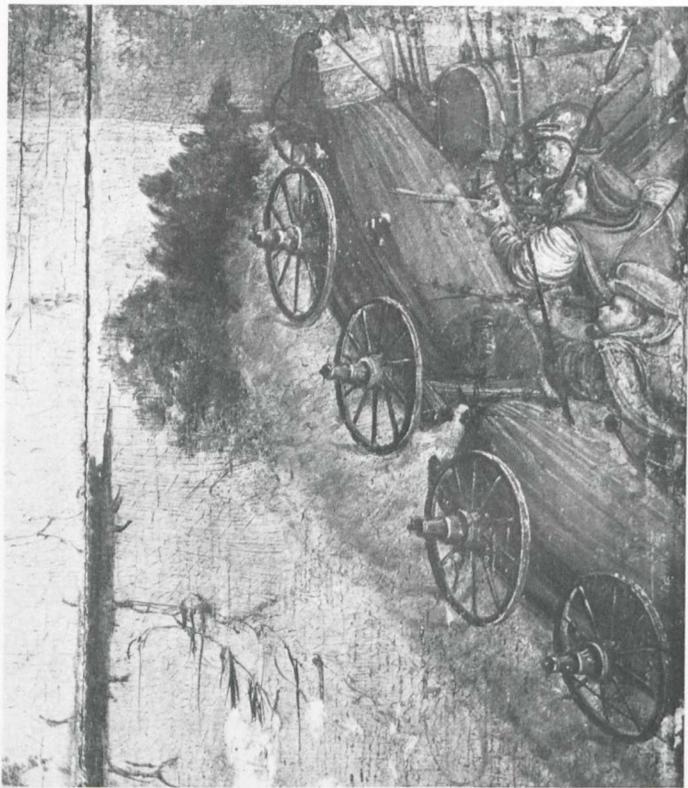




SECTION I: CAMP OF THE POLISH-LITHUANIAN FORCES AND THE CROSSING OF THE DNEIPER.

Scene 1 (left): The Polish-Lithuanian fortified camp. Fragment of a camp fortified by war waggons lashed together (in German: Wagenburg), on the right bank of the Dnieper, near the town of Orsha. Two waggons covered with red fabric are well visible; a third with a yellow cover is only partly discernible. Inside the camp, a pontoon barrel is lying on the ground. Two marksmen are shooting guns rested across the waggon top; next to them stands a helmeted infantryman with a winged spear.

The use of war waggons for camp defence was invented by the Hussites and adopted in the fifteenth century by the Poles, who perfected it. It proved very effective, especially on the vast steppes of Eastern Europe. The theory of managing a military train was elaborated by Jan Tarnowski, who participated in the battle of Orsha as a young man; later appointed Grand Hetman of the Crown, he won several decisive victories using trains, the most spectacular being that over the Wallachians at Obertyn in 1531. In open-field battles the waggon camp was strongly garrisoned as a fortress of last resort.



Scene 2 (below): Staff of the Polish-Lithuanian forces. In the foreground is the white-bearded Duke Constantin Ostrogski, Grand Hetman of Lithuania, commander-in-chief of the allied forces: his head is covered by a bonnet of gold net similar to that used by King Sigismund; he is clad in a long purple gown (the Polish ferezja, reminiscent of the robe of the Byzantine rulers) braided with gold across the breast. He wears two large gold chains and high black boots equipped with a wing of metal to protect the ankle, so vulnerable for the rider without leg armour. (The author has found no other example, real or iconographical, of such a wing. It must be one of those ephemeral objects which, briefly needed and produced, disappeared leaving hardly a trace). The Hetman supports his foot on a hooped stirrup with a ball beneath.

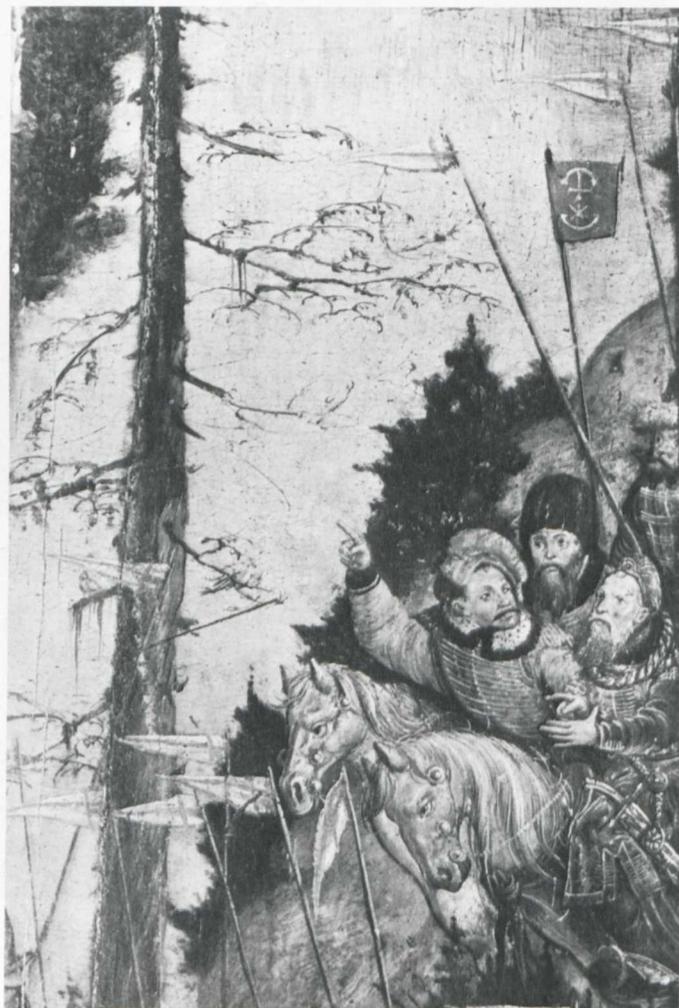
On his left side is a typical Hungarian gilded sabre suspended on ornamented belts. The Hetman's sable-coloured steed is covered with a blue caparison; the trappings are red with golden plates. The horse's eye is almost human in form and expression, a characteristic of the school of Cranach the Elder. The Hetman is vividly gesticulating, pointing toward the battlefield.

Ostrogski, born c. 1460, was about fifty-four at the time of the battle, but here looks older. According to contemporaries he was "of small posture but of magnificent heart, accessible to everybody, generous to the knights, merciful to captives, more experienced in war than anyone". He was one of those powerful Byelorussian dukes who, after the Polish-Lithuanian union, were polonized and played an important role in the State. As a young man he was taken prisoner by Ivan III, Grand Duke of Moscow, and forced to swear allegiance. Sent to fight the Tartars, he won a great victory, but escaped from Muscovy under the protection of the Polish king. In 1512, as Lithuanian Hetman, he again defeated the Tartars at Wisniowiec; two years later he became the hero of Orsha.

In the painting two mounted officers, one Polish, one Lithuanian, form the Hetman's staff. The forward officer with raised arm has features typical of the Sarmatians (that branch of the Slavic peoples to which Poles attribute their origins): an oval, beardless face, downward-curved moustache, and a mild expression. He wears a kind of renaissance toque, and a Polish delia gown, braided in front. Only partly visible, the Lithuanian officer has a different type of physiognomy and costume, a large bearded face, tense and severe, topped by a fur cap matching a red fur-lined coat.

The Hetman is accompanied by his mounted pennon-bearer — a bearded Lithuanian wearing a white Tartar-style pointed fur cap and a red ferezja. The pennon on the spiked staff is a red square with two gilded heraldic devices of Ostrogski: the upper one is called Ogonczyk in Polish, the lower Leliwa. Ostrogski, having served the old Russian Ruryk family — the famous ruling dynasty — had used the traditional heraldic symbol of St. George and the dragon. But in Poland, after his Muscovite captivity, he changed his coat of arms to the signs of two Polish families, Kosciielecki and Tarnowski, first his friends, later relatives by marriage.

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Scene 3 (left): Detachment of fourteen hussars approaching the ford (a modular group). The group is headed by a commander with characteristic black hair and beard, wearing a hussar top hat of black felt with gilded metal rim and plume holder, a purple Hungarian dolman coat with gold braid and a sleeved Hungarian mente cloak lined with ermine. He rides a chestnut horse and his right arm is slightly raised in a gesture of halting or peroration. He may be George Radziwiłł, nicknamed "Hercules" at the time of the battle, Voivode of Kiev, and Hetman of Lithuania after the death of Ostrogski in 1531.

To the lower right of the commander rides a hussar wearing a sea-green hat, a green-pink dolman with standing collar, a brocaded mente cloak, tight green hose, red half-length boots with the ankle wing, spurs with long necks and rowels, hoop stirrups, a gilded belt, a Hungarian sabre and a blue Hungarian wooden shield with a gold rim. His horse is white, harnessed with trappings and brocaded cloth; its head is held by a martingale, its neck with a richly worked collar.

The remaining twelve hussars form a gallery of Sarmatian types; young, middle-aged and elderly faces, bearded, clean shaven, others with moustaches only. Various sorts of head covering are worn: a top hat with a brim (similar to that in fashion in Burgundy in the fifteenth century); a brimless top hat with metal band and plume holder; a conical fur cap also banded by metal (sometimes fitted with chin-straps and often worn over a skull cap); a flat Hungarian cap with an up-turned, cuff-like brim notched and ornamented with a plume; and an inverted-bowl cap partly notched above the forehead. Basic costume components are repeated: the dolman, hose; boots with horseshoe-shaped heel protectors, and with the ankle wings of Scene 2.

These hussars are armed with lances (the iron heads are missing in many cases, perhaps an oversight of the painter) flying white pennons with a red cross. As in other scenes, the pennons are pointed toward the left indicating wind direction. Note Hungarian sabres and shields (See Appendix, I, II and III).

Hussars were an important military formation in the Polish-Lithuanian army of the period. [This species of cavalry has been extensively treated by the author in THE ARMS AND ARMOR ANNUAL for 1973-74. — Ed.]⁸ Created in Hungary in the second half of the fifteenth century under King Matthias Corvinus when fighting the Turks, the hussar cavalry incorporated oriental and West European features, along with national Hungarian ones. Hussars were first introduced in Poland as foreign mercenaries; soon polonized, they developed in the sixteenth century into a half-heavy, armoured cavalry.

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Scene 4 (right): Detachment of fourteen heavy armoured horsemen approaching the ford (a modular group). The riders are arrayed in three rows. Fourteen faces are visible (the modular number); tops of helmets in the background indicate that the group is more numerous. The knight on the right wing wears a sallet with raised visor, the rest have typical 1510-15-style Maximilian armets, Maximilian full armour with smooth or slightly fluted globular breastplates, and saddles with a high plate on the front bow. The horses are in full armour: chanfrons, crinets, peytrals and cruppers; stirrups are bows with short treads. Although knights normally carried a light demi-lance which required no lance-rest, in this painting they bear only long swords with large pommels and S-shaped quillons; lances in this case must have been transported separately.

These heavy, full suits of man and horse armour are surely of German manufacture. Good examples survive in European and American armouries, and much pertinent iconographical material has come down to us, in particular the works of Leonhard Beck, Hans Burgkmair the Elder and Albrecht Dürer.



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Scene 5 (above left): Commander of the heavy armoured horsemen. Head turned towards his squadron, torso towards the beholder; he is a man in his prime. Polish commanders always went into battle bareheaded to show their faces to their men in moments of confusion and anxiety. Like his men, he is dressed in full armour, but it is decorated with a gold chain, and his sword has a gilded pommel and quillons. His horse is superbly armoured. His identity is not certain: he may be Swierczowski or Sampolinski; both led Polish heavy cavalry that day.

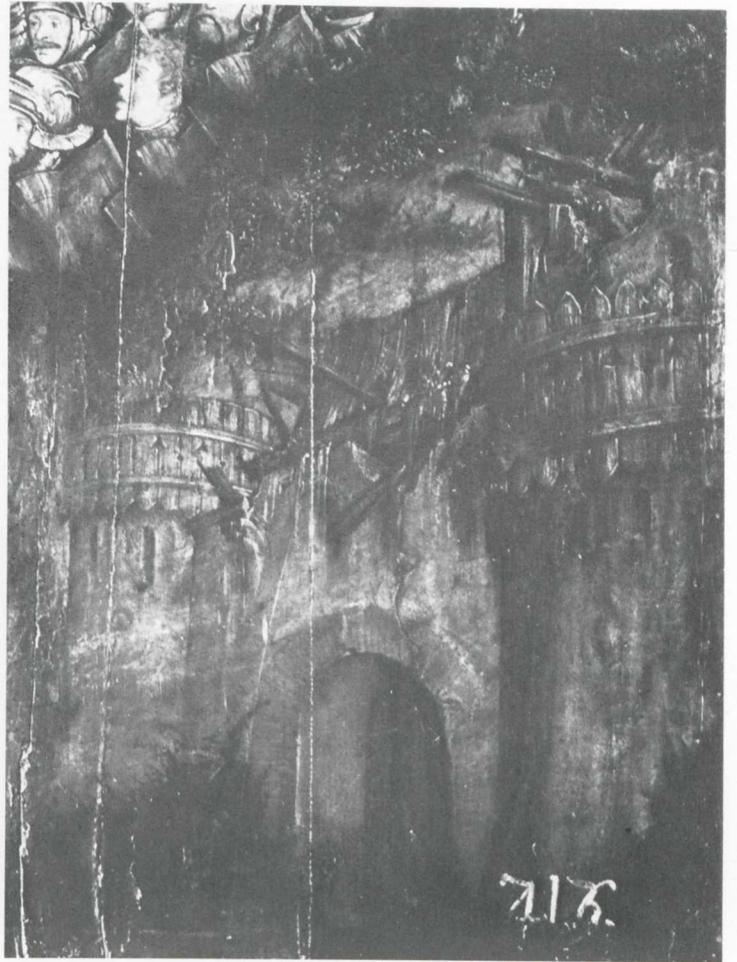
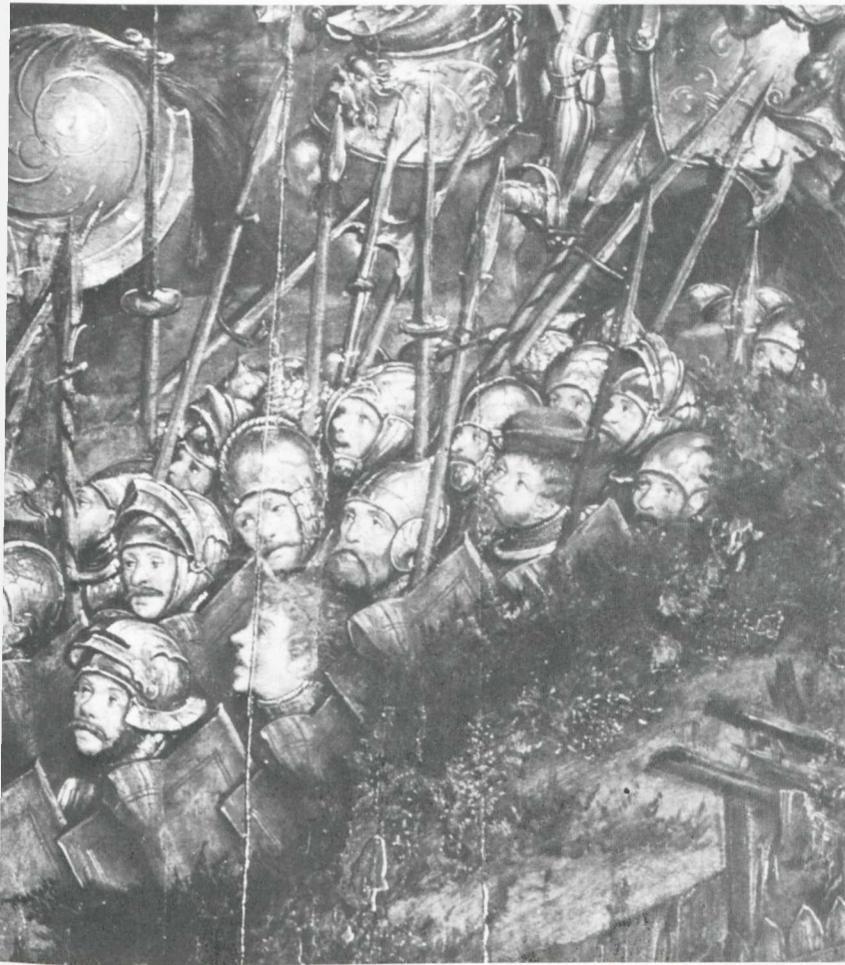
Scene 6 (above centre): Infantry marching towards the bridge. A regiment consisting of an officer and a group of soldiers; twenty-one faces are shown (a modular number). The two front soldiers are pushing a cannon. The moustached officer in a fancy red cap, mail collar and breastplate over a red jacket, holds a halberd; his right hand is raised as if giving an order. The soldiers' head coverings are of great variety: a sallet with moveable visor, an armet, a skull-cap with pendant ear- and nape-guards, a pointed skull helmet; there is also a hat worn over a steel skull-secrete. Some men wear Hungarian caps, others are bare-headed. They wear jerkins with green or pink puff sleeves covered by elements of armour, i.e. breastplates, collars, vambraces. They carry pavese shields with vertical ridges down the middle, and pole-arms such as halberds, partisans, spears, winged spears and eel-spears (Appendix IV, V).



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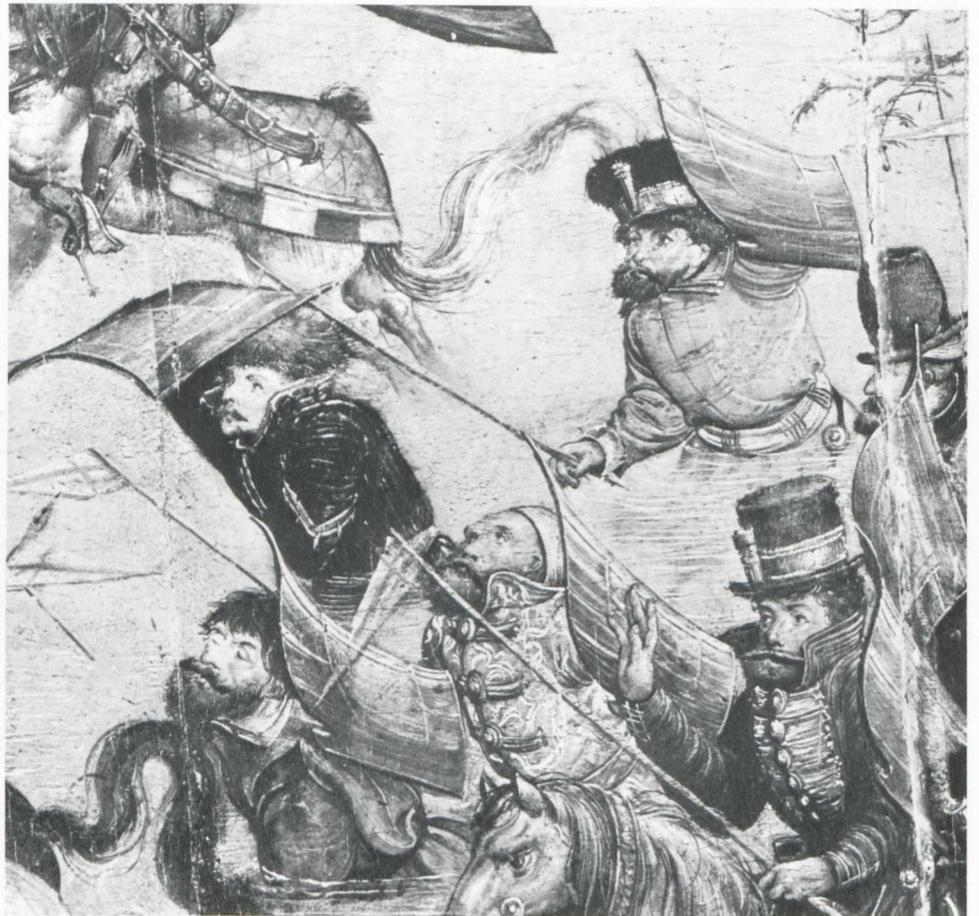


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Scene 7 (above right): The Castle. Partly of masonry, partly of wood, it is shown half-ruined. In the centre an arched gate, above it a very damaged roof, and on both sides round towers with loopholes and wooden machicolations (Appendix VI).

Scene 8 (left): Mounted hussar crossing the river. This man is another example of hussar costume and arms: a black hat with a gold band, ostrich feathers in the plume holder, a brocaded dolman, and a long pink coat with loose sleeves which flutter back from his shoulder. His sabre in a gilded scabbard hangs from the belt. The horse collar is adorned with a horsetail; the horse is white, with mane and tail dyed red (the fashion of equine dyeing came to Poland from the East; it was popular in various Oriental countries, as far as India).

Scene 9 (right): Four hussars crossing the river on foot. Three sport different headgear – hat, cap and bonnet – and one is bareheaded. The one with the hat is wearing a scarf-like cloth belt. All hold high their Hungarian shields, as if protecting themselves against arrows. They also have lances.



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Scene 10 (right): Five mounted hussars crossing the river. Hussars in typical equipment, all in hats, some of them put on over bonnets. They carry demi-lances with long iron heads, and the usual white pennons with red crosses.

Scene 11 (far right): Five heavy armoured horsemen crossing the river. Five knights with bearded Sarmatian features. All wear sallets and armets; one carries his helm. This is a detachment of the Radziwiłł private army: the rider in the centre foreground holds up a lance terminating with the Radziwiłł colours: a red square with three black, gold-mounted trumpets arranged in a pinwheel. The horses are almost totally submerged, nostrils and mouths barely above the surface.

Scene 12 (below): Officers of the heavy armoured cavalry reaching dry land. The knight on the left, with a purple toque over a red bonnet, is probably Jan Tarnowski; his companion rides a horse with exceptionally fine bards ornamented with bosses of whirling rosettes.

Scene 13 (below, centre): The bridge and the cannon. The bridge of beams tied together floats on empty barrels, partly discernible under the water. Here the critical moment of transporting a heavy field gun is depicted with great technical knowledge and precision. The piece's barrel, reinforced at the muzzle and in the middle, has protruding



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"dolphins" and a quadrant, and is mounted on an iron-reinforced wooden carriage. It is being dragged by seven soldiers (a modular number) dressed in jerkins, stockings and boots, armed in various helmets and pieces of armour; two have swords. Their commander is clothed in German style, with a red toque, black stockings and a slashed doublet of golden colour lined with red.

It is the similarity of this cannon to the one etched by Dürer in 1518 that caused the polemics between Bialostocki and Stefanska. There are three possible conclusions: first, our painter based his version on the Dürer etching, which could have reached Cracow soon after 1518; second, Dürer saw the Battle and, attracted by the image of the cannon in its foreground, based his work on the painted one; or, third, both artists drew on some other, now-lost or as yet undiscovered illustration. Some new observations may be made on the congruencies and disparities between the two versions: Dürer's much slimmer cannon has a catch in the block behind the barrel that is exactly shown; in the Orsha gun the same detail is not explicit. On the other hand, Orsha's iron mounts are more numerous and technically absolutely correct. A feature hitherto overlooked is that one Dürer wheel has seven spokes, the corresponding Orsha six.



11

SECTION II: PREPARATION FOR BATTLE ON THE POLISH-LITHUANIAN SIDE

Scene 14 (below right): Three hussars or light horse drying themselves on the bank. Three soldiers, two lying on their backs with their shields under their heads, and one lying on his stomach (with a bow across his arm and arrows in a quiver at the back), are pouring water out of their boots. Two sabres and a sword are on the ground.

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Scene 15 (above): Troop of horsemen serving "Tartar style". Fourteen riders (a modular number) hidden in a small wood. Their equipment is similar to that of the hussars but less uniform, more oriental: fur-trimmed and pointed caps prevail, also a sort of dolman. There are six lances and one Hungarian shield; most of the men carry bows in plain leather cases; all are armed with Hungarian-style sabres. Dolmans are tied with scarf belts in which are thrust buzdygan maces, and, in one case, a war flail consisting of a metal ball on a chain and small haft. The horses wear no coverures, their trappings are of red straps (Appendix VII, VIII).

Scene 16 (above, centre): Seven hussars at rest, conversing after the crossing (a modular number). A group portrait. Head coverings as seen before: hats rimmed with metal, or Hungarian caps adorned with eagle feathers.

Scene 17 (above right): Heavy armoured knights at rest after crossing the river. One of the seven (a modular number) is standing by his horse and leaning against the saddle (a war hammer is thrust through a ring at the pommel); another is reclining on a saddle on the ground; the rest are standing. One of them has donned his helm; two are wearing toques; the others, bonnets used as a padding under helms. They hold lances and carry swords at their belts; one is resting his hand on a war hammer.



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Scene 18 (below, far left): Two knights drying themselves on the bank. One, in cuirass, is lying on his stomach and shaking the water out of his boots; the other, in bonnet, white shirt, hose, and stockings, is pulling on the loops attached to his shoes. Armament elements are scattered all around: an armet helm, a cuirass, a collar, a sword and a war hammer.

Scene 19 (left): Mounted military band. The band consists of a drummer and three trumpeters. The drummer, in German attire, is wearing a black toque with feathers and a golden-colour jerkin, and holds pad-headed drumsticks; kettle-drums are decorated with a red drum-cloth (the other drum is hidden by the horse). Two trumpeters are blowing their pitched, unvalved trumpets, the third is resting. Trumpets were used for setting marching pace and for transmitting orders. The musicians are in fancy dress: red toques with tall feathers, a checkered cap, and dolmans or jerkins of glaring colours (Appendix IX).



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Scene 20 (above): Group of infantrymen opening fire. Six soldiers (one only partly visible), three of them firing matchlock guns aimed upward at an angle of about 70°; (this may be a distortion of perspective). One man is about to insert the ramrod into the barrel. All three barrels are reinforced at the muzzles and full-stocked almost to the end; locks have rearward-falling serpentines. Butts are held to the cheek in the manner that was to survive in German wheellocks into the 1750's. One man wears a cuirass, another an iron skull piece. All have swords – blade tip protrude out of the damaged scabbard at the extreme left and right of the Scene. There is a white cap, a hat over a bonnet, a red jerkin, and a green sleeveless doublet. Accoutrements include a bullet bag, a small black powderhorn and a bandolier for cartridges; note hook on the muzzle of gun being loaded: often called "rampart hooks", they were more likely warring spikes (Appendix x).

Scene 21 (right): Self-portrait of the artist? A bearded, bareheaded man sits on a stump amidst shrubs at the river bank. The only unarmed and unarmoured man on the battle field, he is clad in a black jerkin, yellow stockings and short, wide, backless slippers. His right hand is raised in an odd gesture with a curious twist of the fingers. Thus far overlooked by scholars, this figure is probably the painter, who is portraying himself either as an eyewitness to the battle or as a vicarious, purely symbolic "participant".

Scene 22 (above centre): Laying an ambush for the enemy. Here Duke Ostrogski, commander-in-chief of the Polish-Lithuanian forces, appears for the second time – a phenomenon consented by the technique of simultaneous portrayal of successive events. He is giving orders for hiding artillery in the wood. Attired as in Scene 2, his right arm is stretched forward in a commanding gesture (Appendix XI). Two aides-de-camp with Hungarian shields follow him; one holds the heraldic pennon of Scene 2.

The two serpentines have polyhedral barrels reinforced at the muzzles and breeches; the trails of the carriages are blocked. The master of artillery who is readying them appears to be the German who commanded the pontoon crossing; he wears the same red toque, golden-coloured jerkin and sword at his belt. Next to him is a gunner holding the rammer. There are also tool boxes and various items of artillery equipment, including compasses (Appendix XI and XII).



22

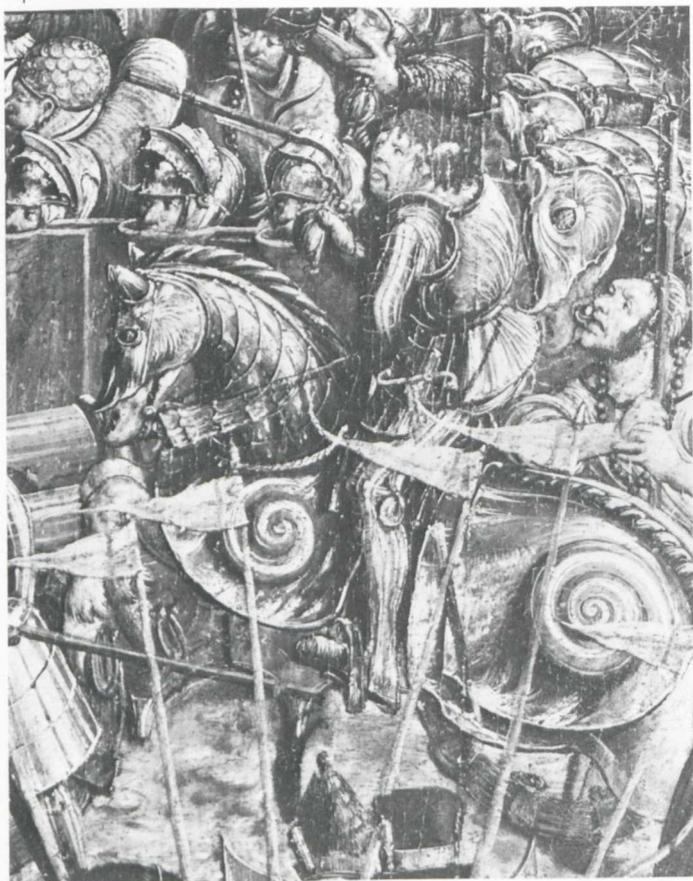
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Scene 23 (above): The Great Detachment of heavy armoured horsemen. The largest contingent of Polish knights, about eight stand mounted in each of five rows. They are armed and equipped almost uniformly: armets of Maximilian style, visors raised; full armour with globular, slightly fluted breast-plates; lances with triangular white pennons with red crosses; lances (possibly demi-lances: their staffs are rather thin), long two-handed swords with round pommels and S-shaped quillons; saddles with large plate-bows; horses in bards. All knights are shown in left profile – only one, in the centre, is facing the beholder. Above is a big red banner on a spiked shaft. Next to the banner are the three musicians of Scene 19.

Scene 24 (left): Leader of the heavy armoured troops. This is probably the same high officer who led the knights to the ford, Scene 5: Swierczowski or Sampolinski. His features are slightly changed by the angle. Still without helm, he holds an all-metal buzdygan mace. His horse is in full armour – but not that shown in Scene 5 – with plate neck defence, and handsome volutes on the peytral and crupper.



25



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SECTION III: POLISH-LITHUANIAN FORCES IN COMBAT

Scene 25 (above): Polish infantry.

First line: Seven heavily armoured soldiers (modular group) two of whom wear armour skirts or tonlets extending to the knees. Used chiefly in Germany for tournament combat on foot, this is surely artistic licence, since it would seem to have been pointless to take such unwieldy and unmilitary armour into battle in the steppes and marshes of Russia. The first of these soldiers, in an armet with raised visor, is fighting with an eel-spear, the second, in a closed bicoque helm (normally also tournament armour), wields a winged spear (Appendix XIII). The other five men stand between the cannons, perhaps as defenders; they are wielding various types of pole-arms.

Second line: Eleven shield-bearers in armets and sallets make a pavese wall.

Third line: Seven infantrymen (modular number) shoot matchlock guns straight ahead; they are wearing scale helmets, burgonets or steel skulls.

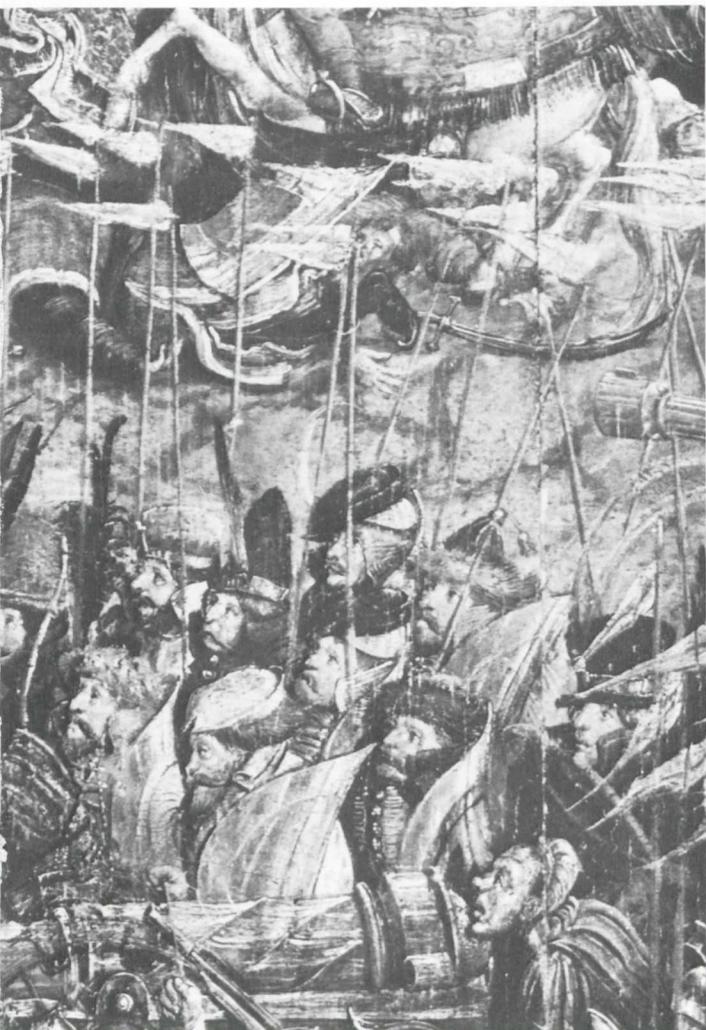
Fourth line: Six infantrymen are preparing matchlocks for shooting: note ramrods in use; helmets and Hungarian caps are worn.

Fifth line: Seven soldiers (modular number) shoot high for unaimed, maximum range. Guns are abutted on the left cheeks, surely a liberty of the painter: he may have wished to show the act of aiming.

Scene 26 (below, right): Artillery of the first line. In front of the infantry array is a battery of eleven serpentine guns in position; they are similar to those in the ambush, Scene 22.

26





28



29

Scene 27 (above, centre): Attack of the light horse on the right wing of the front array. A group of mounted archers shooting Tartar style, and hussars with demi-lances and sabres. Shields are of rounded Turkish and pointed Hungarian styles. A red banner is held by bearer in a Lithuanian fur cap. At the top of the scene an unhorsed Muscovite flees – in his haste he has lost his helmet. At the bottom, a gun and gunner.

Scene 28 (left): Hussar charging. A hussar swinging a sabre back-handed. This stance will be repeated several times (Appendix XIV). In the foreground a leader with a buzdygan mace.

Scene 29 (above, right): Attack of the light horse at the left wing of the front detachment. This formation of horsemen is similar to that in Scene 27: there are riders more Tartarico and hussars. This part of the picture stands out for its high precision of details in figures and equipment, but the battle mêlée still makes full orientation difficult. The twenty-six riders are arrayed in rows of four, plus two leaders in front. In the first row the hussars attack directly with lances lowered; one hussar has a peculiar cap with a pointed top and brim divided into four parts with raised flaps, a single eagle's feather in front (Appendix XV). Three of the four, with lances half bowed, carry Hungarian shields, the fourth a round Turkish one. There are also five archers, their Asiatic-style reflex bows strongly bent, fletches drawn up to eye level; one archer is taking his bow out of the case. A bearded man in a brown toque is holding a green banner. The riders are dressed in hussar costume or in jerkins and doublets; they are girded with fabric or chain belts into which are thrust maces, war flails or kourbashes. They have half-length boots with typical hussar wings, long-necked spurs, and hoop stirrups.



30

Scene 30 (above): Attack of the hussar troop from the right Polish wing against the Muscovite detachment of the left hand. This troop also consists of twenty-six riders, for symmetry with Scene 29. Here all are wearing uniform hats and dolmans, and carry demi-lances and Hungarian shields. In their leader's raised hand a buzdygan mace is poised for a blow; next to him a hussar is coiled for a backhand sabre slash (cf. Scene 28). Lances are lowered; to the right of the leader a lance is being thrust with both hands. The banner is a white eagle on a red ground, the national emblem of Poland.

Scene 31 (right): Hetman Ostrogski giving the order of pursuit. He is seen for the third time in the same attire, this time wielding a buzdygan mace. He exhorts the group of Lithuanian Tartars to pursue the enemy. He is having difficulty making himself heard in the din: some riders are turning their heads toward him questioningly — it is in fact recorded that Ostrogski shouted himself completely hoarse during the battle. He is followed by his aides-de-camp, the hussar and the pennon-bearer.



31

Scene 32 (right): A troop of Lithuanian Tartar cavalry. A group of riders in high, white sugar-loaf caps, some worn over steel skull-secrètes, dressed in kaftans and sleeveless quilted doublets, armed with sabres and bows, some of them shooting. They fight under a blue Lithuanian banner. Their leader in a turban helmet holds a bow in his left hand and has a sabre at his belt (Appendix XVI).

During the fifteenth century, the Grand Dukes of Lithuania took large numbers of prisoners in wars against the Tartar Khanates. Some of these were given land in Lithuania for homesteading with the obligation of military service to the dukes. In this scene we have a very rare, perhaps unique, portrayal of such a group.



32

Scene 33 (below): Combat between the Lithuanian Tartars and the Muscovites. This fragment of the painting is hard to decipher with the naked eye: the camera is of great aid here. In a violent clash between the Muscovite cavalry and the Lithuanian Tartars, the Tartar array is upset, many are killed, others turn their horses for flight. The Tartars' equipment, their caps over steel skull pieces and their quilted doublets, are easily seen (Appendix XVII). One may also study the differences between the Tartars and the Muscovites, described in the next section.



33



34

Scene 34 (above): Two hussars in pursuit of Muscovite riders. Hussars with lowered lances attack three Muscovite riders turning to flee – one defends himself with a sabre, the others with bows. The hussar in the foreground has a mente cloak lined with ermine, at his saddle small signal drums; he would seem to be a leader (Appendix XVIII).

Scene 35 (left): Hussar commander in pursuit. A mounted officer in brocaded dolman and with a raised buzdygan mace is chasing two Muscovites fleeing on foot.

36



35



Scene 36 (below, left): Two moribund Polish-Lithuanian fighters. Almost crushed by a crowd of Muscovite riders, a wounded knight in full armour and a wounded bussar, both on foot, are still fighting, but their position is hopeless.

Scene 37 (below): Slain hussar. At the centre, a slain hussar lying on the ground amidst Muscovites. In the foreground, a severed head. Though death and mutilation on the Polish-Lithuanian side are played down in this painting, such occasional views acknowledge that victory was not achieved without both.



37



38

SECTION IV: THE ALLIED VICTORY

Scene 38 (above): The Great Detachment of the Muscovite forces. A mass of about a hundred riders under a pale red banner. Most are stern, bearded men. At the right flank (toward bottom of scene) and in the middle, they stand immobile but alert and ready for the order to engage. On the left flank (top), however, the army is beginning to retreat under the impact of the hussar charge. A large portion of the Muscovites turn to flee.

Russian costumes and equipment are nearly uniform in style: a helmet with pointed skull, sometimes with a gold rim, sometimes with a fluted surface, in some cases with attached cheek pieces, the spiked finial decorated with a small pennon in white (the tradition of helmet pennons goes back to Parthian Persia). Along with the helmets, white, fur-trimmed, sugar-loaf-shaped caps are worn, decorated in front with a medallion (Appendix XIX). Most of the riders are boyars, i.e. the nobility of Muscovy; they wear armours called bekhters, made of small, slightly curved plates fastened together with mail. Bekhters are here rendered in a silvery colour, which means pure iron, but sometimes the stripes of plates are alternately silver and gold. These armours are worn over thick Russian quilted teghilay kaf-tans with puffed sleeves. Hose or trousers are very puffed, the red boots have turned-up points in the Mongolian style; stirrups are hooped.

There are some small, round Persian-style shields. Horse trappings are of dark thongs with gilded mounts. The offensive arms are sabres in the Turkish fashion, axes in the Persian, and, above all, bows of Asiatic reflex type, the quivers held at the right. A specific style of riding may be observed: very short stirrups oblige the rider to bend his legs sharply, knees high. Saddles have square leather guards on both sides.



Scene 39 (left): Russian Commander-in-chief. This is most probably the white-bearded Czeladnin, commander of all Muscovite forces, appointed by the Grand Duke Vassili. He wears a sable cap with a top of white felt, a blue ribbon and a huge gold ornament set with a ruby (caps of similar rank are still preserved in the Armoury of the Kremlin in Moscow). He is clad in a long brocaded kaftan bordered with ermine, and a purple sleeveless outer garment; at his back, a quiver filled with arrows; his boots have upturned toes, his spurs small rowels, his stirrups are hooped; he rides a white stallion, and is raising his arm high, as if giving an order (Appendix xx).

Scene 40 (right): Vanguard in combat. On the right flank, standing a little back, the leader of the vanguard in a fur-trimmed white cap, and a red kaftan lined with ermine, is mounted on a white horse. All around him boyars in helmets and bekhters. Riders arrayed in long rows. The two front rows are in a fierce struggle: bow-strings drawn to eye level with thumb and fore-finger, sabres and axes in motion, a bulawa mace with a globular head. Here there is plenty of blood and many fallen dead. On the left flank (top) the fighting turns into a rout.

39

41





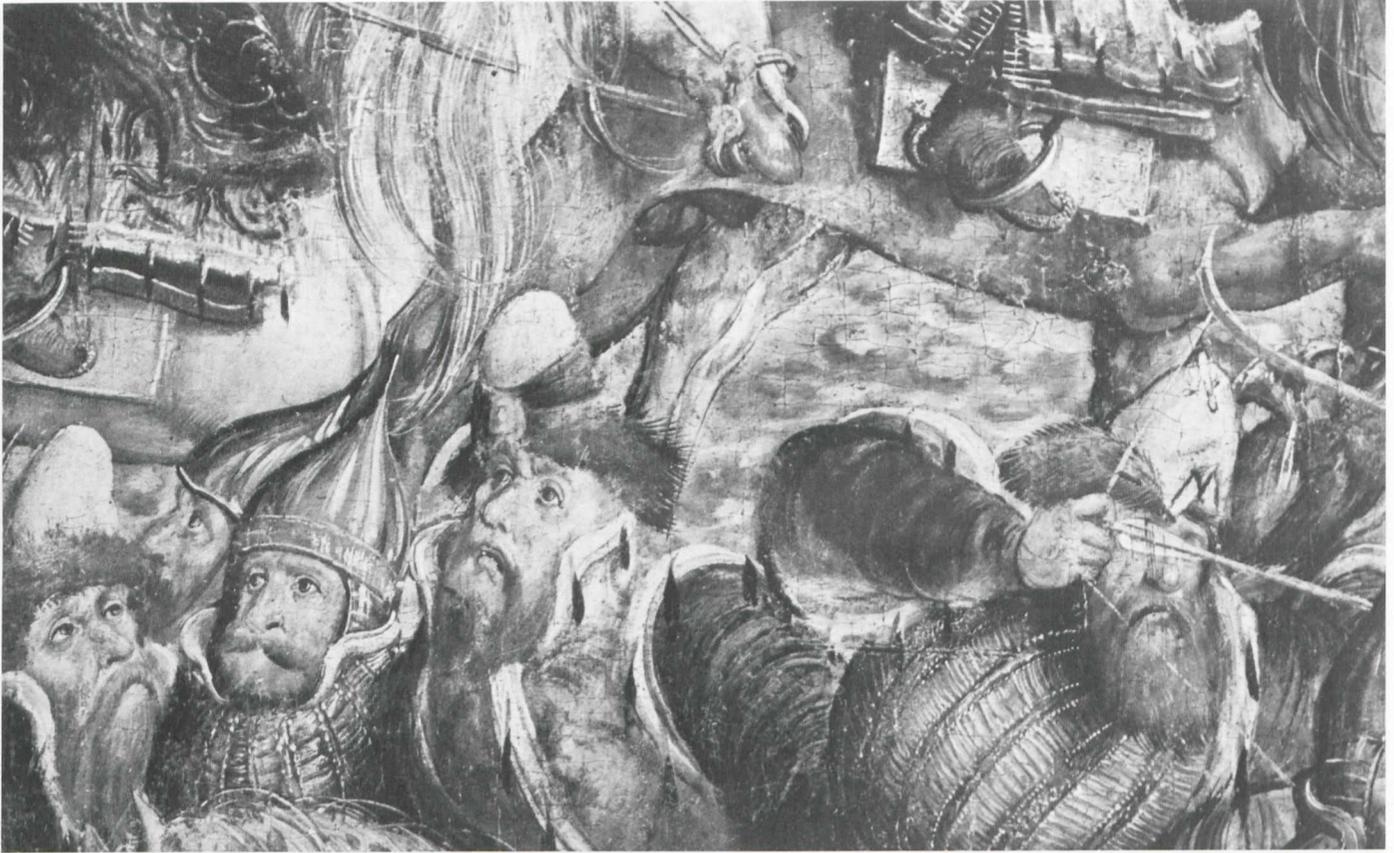
Scene 41 (below, far left). Defeat of the right-hand detachment. Complete chaos. Muscovites are fighting desperately and perishing everywhere. A Muscovite leader is shown top right. The riders are pushed to the river, many fall from their horses (one backwards, still holding his sabre: dressed in a yellow kaftan with a bekhter thrown over white trousers and high boots, he has already lost his helmet). Blood drenches the sandy beach, men and horses drown, the hands of the drowning clutch wildly, white felt caps drift in the current; a big white banner trails in the water.

Scene 42 (below): Dying Muscovite fighters. Much as Scene 41. Men trampled under hoof, etc.

40

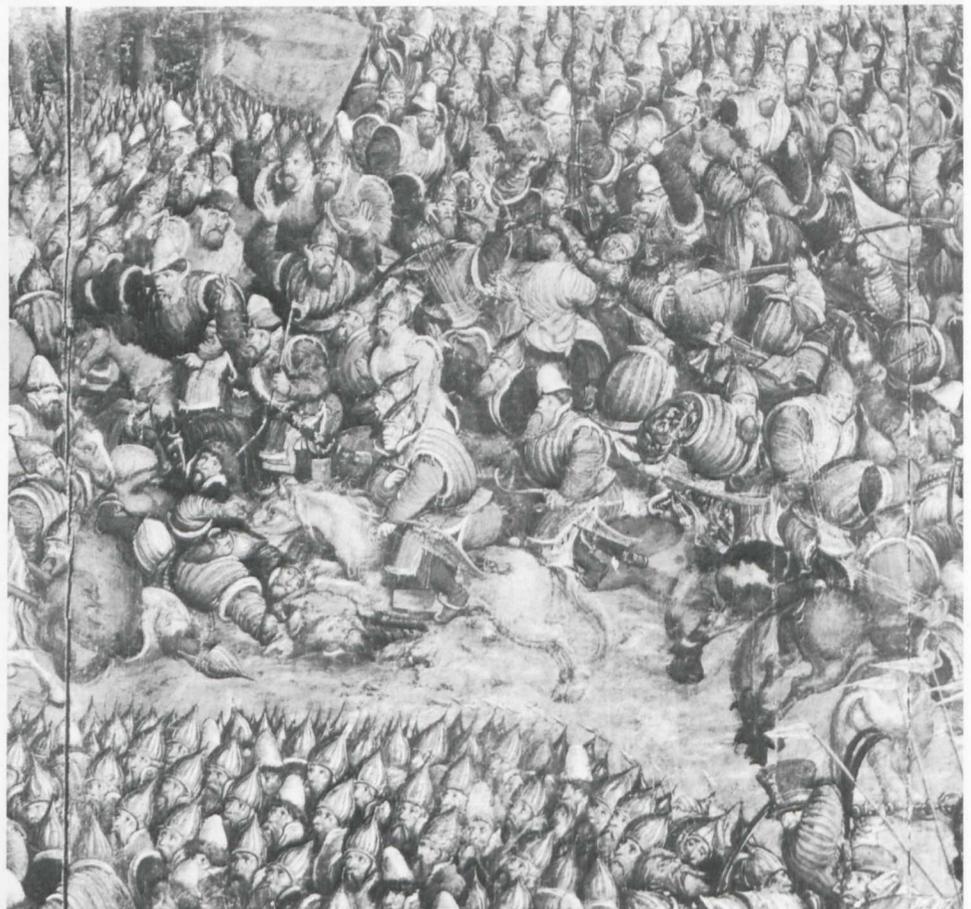
42





43

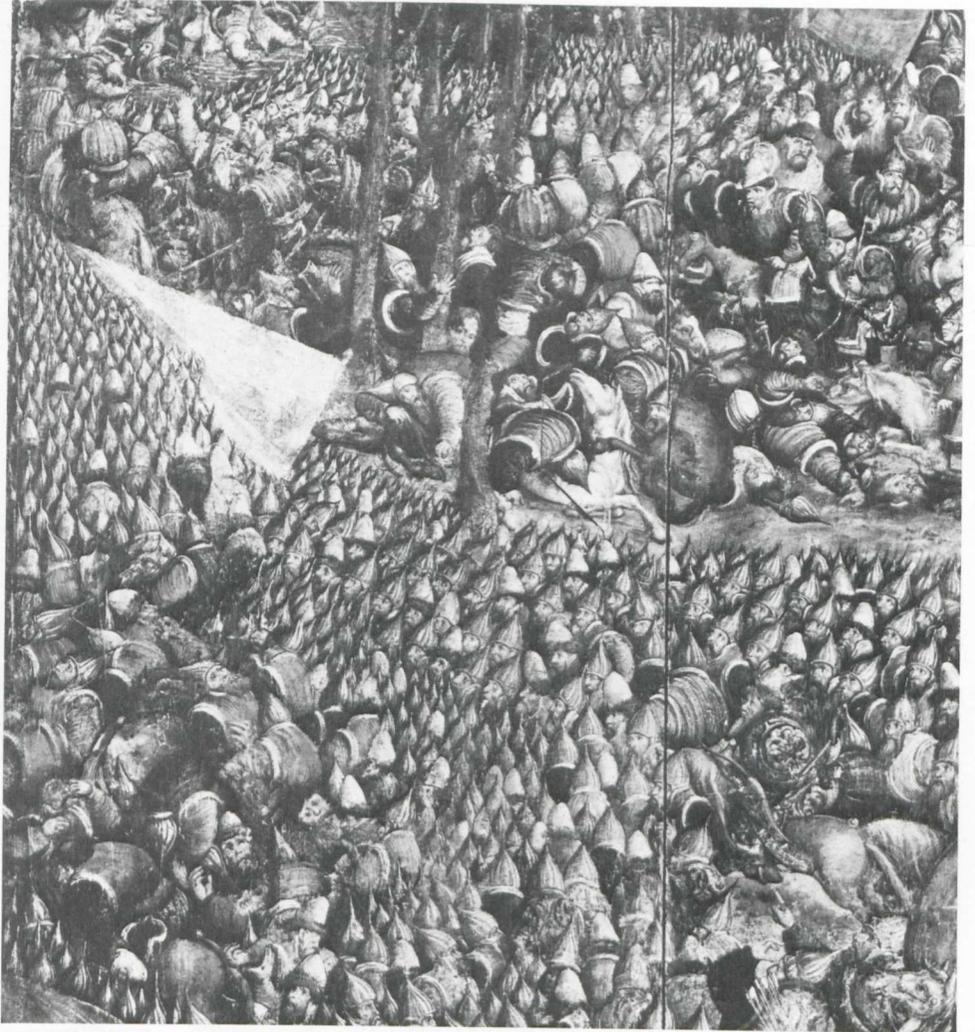
44



Scene 43 (above): Flight of a Muscovite commander. In the middle, the half-figure of an escaping Muscovite commander, probably Golica. He is shown with a large face and red beard; he wears the sable cap of a dignitary; his flight is covered by an archer shooting back (Appendix XXI). Some Russian historians have attributed the Muscovite defeat to discord and rancour between Czeladnin and Golica, even imputing to the former an act of treachery.⁹

Scene 44 (right): Combat of the left hand detachment. The mass of the Muscovite cavalry partly still advancing, partly already retreating; some riders are raising both arms, as if asking quarter; many fall dead and wounded. (Appendix XXII).

45



Scene 45 (right): Retreat of the great detachment and of the left-hand detachment. Riders mostly shown from the back as they flee under a white banner. Wounded soldiers with horses at the edge of the wood, others hidden behind trees. Confusion and defeat.

Scene 46 (below): Four Muscovite riders in flight. They appear to be discussing the odds of survival in some hiding place in the wood.

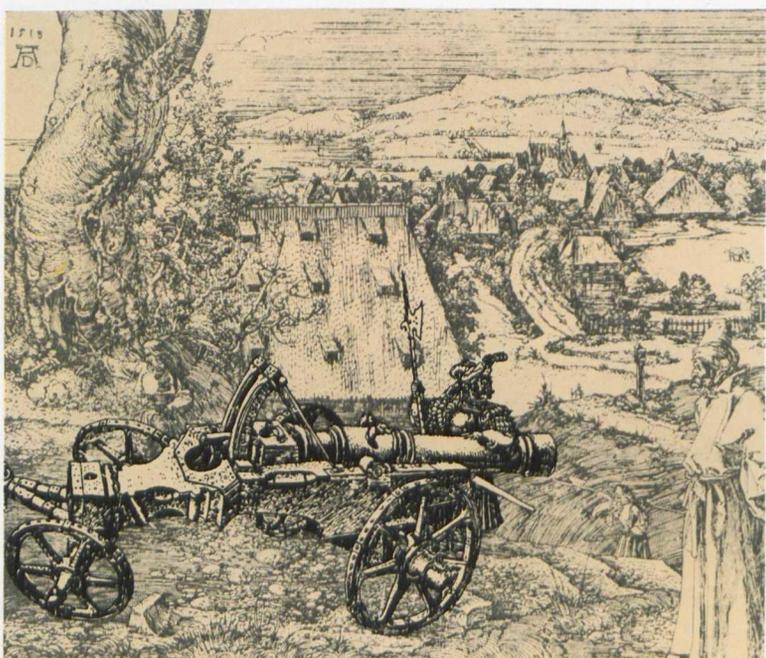
46





THE FOLLOWING SCENES ARE NOT INDICATED IN THE SCHEMA ON PAGES 114-15, BUT FOR REFERENCE CONSISTENCY THEY FOLLOW THE NUMBERING SEQUENCE OF THE BLACK-AND-WHITE SCENES.

47



48

Scenes 47 & 48. *The Orsha cannon compared with the one by Albrecht Dürer: they are nearly identical. See discussion of Scene 13, p. 121.*

Scene 49. *Comprehensive view of Scenes 3, 9 and 10.*



49



50

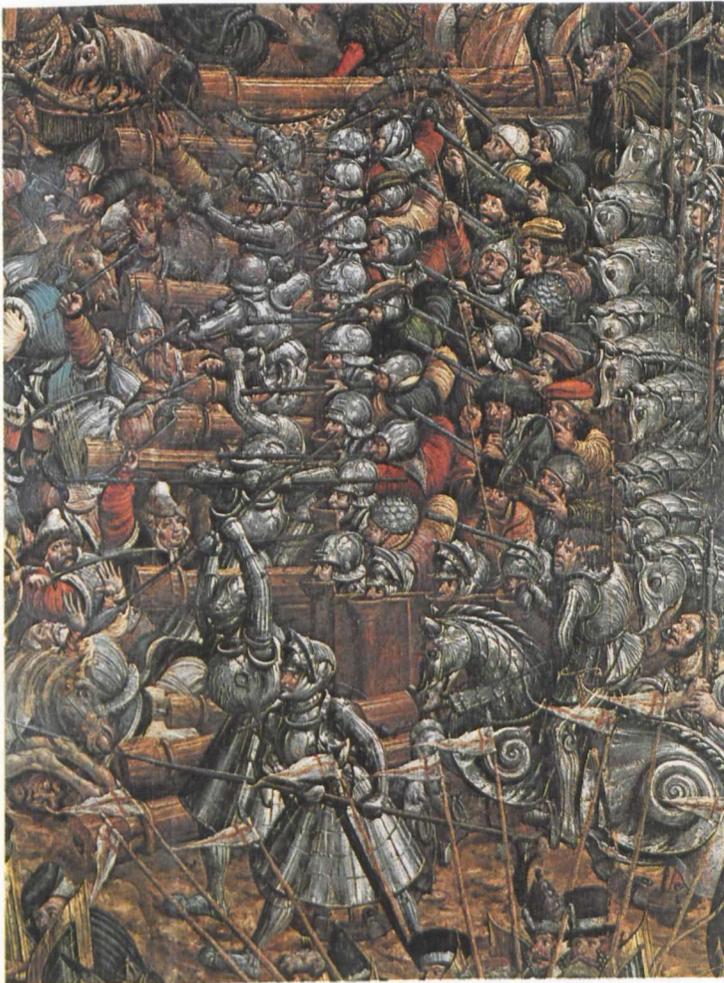
Scene 50. *Detail of Scene 30.*

Scene 51. *Detail of Scene 38.*

Scene 52. *Comprehensive view of Scenes 24, 25, 26 and 29.*



51



52

CONCLUSION

This wealth of details and inherent evidence may help us arrive at a hypothesis about the creation of so remarkable a work. The Polish monographers of the *Battle*, Herbst and Walicki, feel that its author must have been an eyewitness. He has certainly proved his excellent knowledge of the topography, of the participants and of the various actions of the battle, in particular the preludes such as the Polish-Lithuanian crossing of the Dnieper and the arraying of both armies, then the decisive phases of the confrontation; he even portrayed the commanders and officers of both sides. Clearly he was schooled in this genre of painting – one that originated in the circle of Cranach the Elder – and employed with great skill all the contemporary formulas for depicting knights and soldiers (popularised throughout Europe by woodcuts and engravings, among them those of Albrecht Dürer). It is difficult to believe that such a work could have been born out of free imagination and pieced together from second-hand graphics; surely the artist must have made preliminary drawings *in situ* and then started to execute his work in oils not much later, using a good many veterans as models and all manner of equipment as props. Moreover, King Sigismund rewarded Hetman Ostrogski with a triumphal entrance into Wilna shortly after the victory. Triumphal cortèges in those days consisted of the units that had contributed most to the victory, of captives in original dress and armour, and of trophies carried in special waggons. This may have been another model source for our painter. He showed the armaments and costumes, the lineaments and tonsorial styles, not only of the main protagonists – Poles, Lithuanians and Muscovites – but also of the German-style heavy armoured horsemen, of the Hungarian-style hussars and of the Tartar light cavalry. He painted them all in action, from all sides, without subordinating their specific functions at Orsha to the painterly desire of stressing shape, colour and composition.

Nevertheless, nothing is flawless. Our author did, in fact, make some errors and left some incongruities to puzzle us; and he is clearly partisan to the victors (who were, after all, paying his fee). For one thing, he tried to give “his” side better tone, status, prestige, as witness the superlative but also excessive armour of the heavy cavalry and infantry, and the tournament tonlets (Scene 25 – spectacular as these were, they could not have been of much use that day on the Dnieper banks); and it is doubtful that a tilting *bicoque*, popular about 1440, would have been worn in that battle. But some gilding-the-lily was applied to the Muscovites. There is a not entirely credible profusion of very expensive *bekhter* armour and of silks and brocades and other finements. These were worn only by commanders and high boyars, but surely not, as the picture would have it, by almost every rider in the fray.

That death and carnage is the lot of the Muscovites far more than of the Allies has been remarked upon; but even where these realities are admitted, they are prettified much as in all propagandistic war pictures everywhere, anytime; the viewer is spared the true unspeakableness of war.

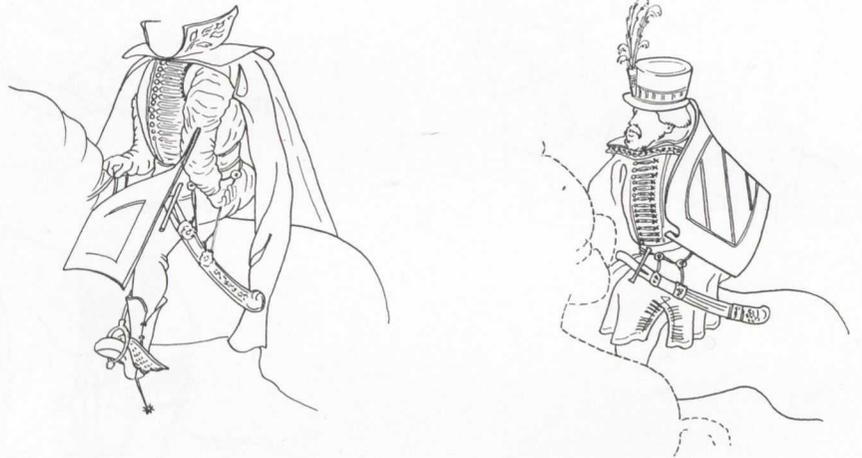
The dispute on the cannon remains unstilled. Dürer could have seen the painting between, say, 1515 and 1518 at the Imperial court, for it may well have been a gift from Sigismund I to the Emperor Maximilian (the Jagiellons were always keen to impress Vienna with their might).

The *Battle of Orsha*, then, is one of the five or six most important monuments of military iconography of sixteenth century Europe. It may be compared with such eminent works as Albrecht Altdorfer's *Battle of Alexan-*

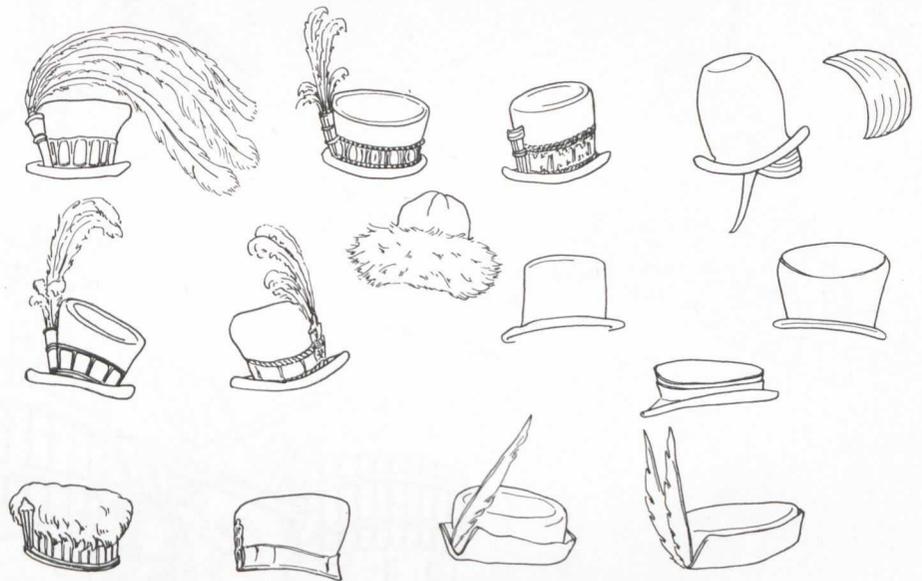
der and Jörg Breu's *Battle of Zama*, but these were born of free imagination, while *Orsha* comes close to being pure reportage. It can certainly bear favourable comparison with other great didactic commemorative monuments, such as Trajan's column and the Bayeux and Pavia tapestries. It is also admirable as a documentation of the polychrome collisions and fusions between East and West.

APPENDICES

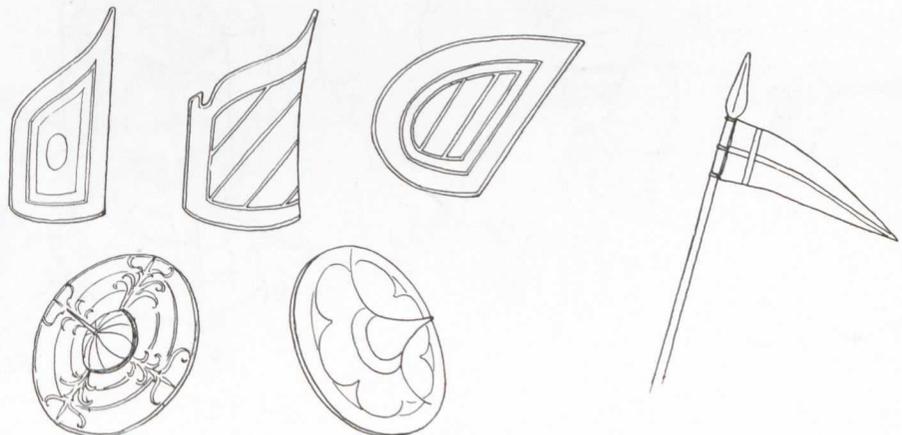
The following drawings by Eva Zygulska will clarify many aspects and details not easily discerned in the halftone reproductions.



I



II



III

I. Hussar riding stances: Scenes 3 and 11.

II. Hussar hats: for example, Scenes 1-3, 8-10, 13 and 16, as well as many scattered specimens elsewhere.

III. Hussar shields: Scenes 3 and 9, and scattered examples elsewhere. Lance: many in various scenes - e.g. 16, 19, etc.

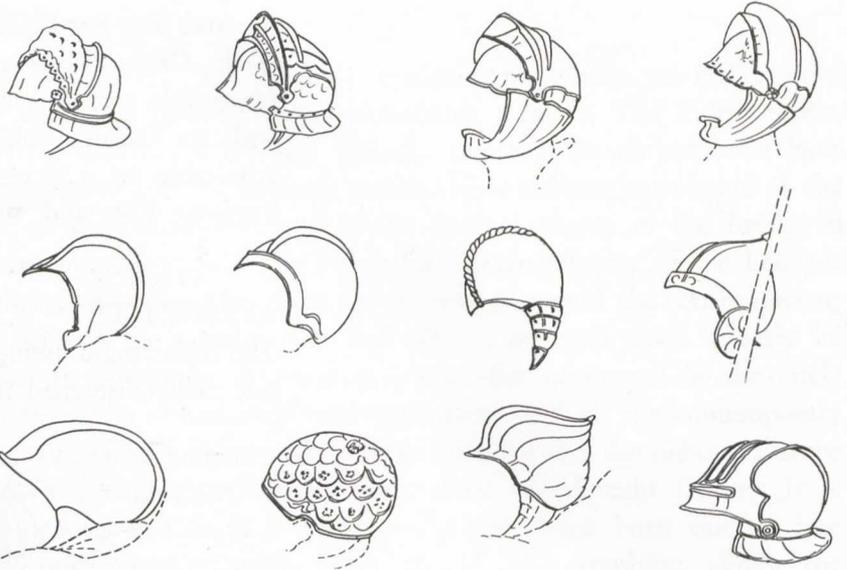
IV. Helmets of the heavy cavalry and light infantry of both sides: Scenes 6, 34 and 36, and scattered examples.

V. Pole-arms of the infantry of both sides: most scenes.

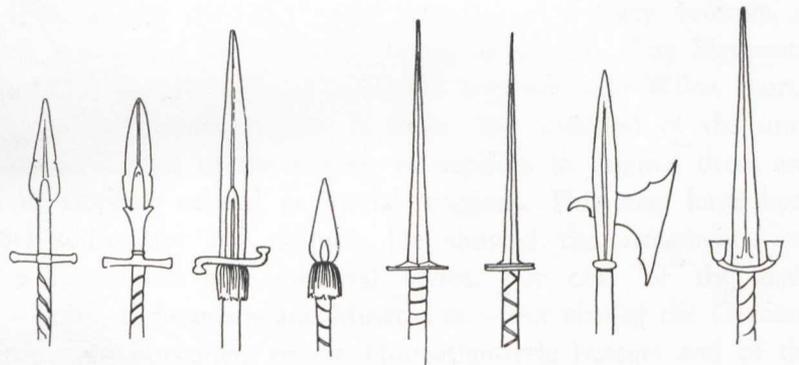
VI. The castle: Scene 7.

VII. Maces carried by the Polish-Lithuanian light cavalry "Tartar style": Scene 15.

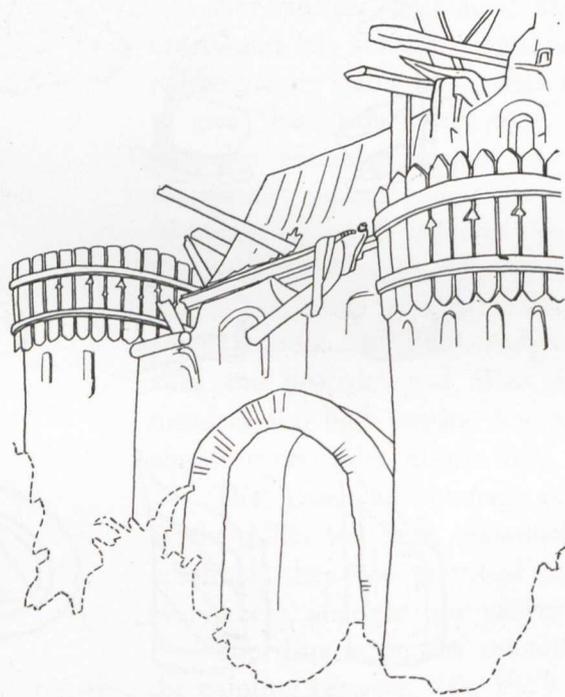
VIII. Polish-Lithuanian light cavalry "Tartar style": Scene 15.



IV



V



VI



VII



VIII



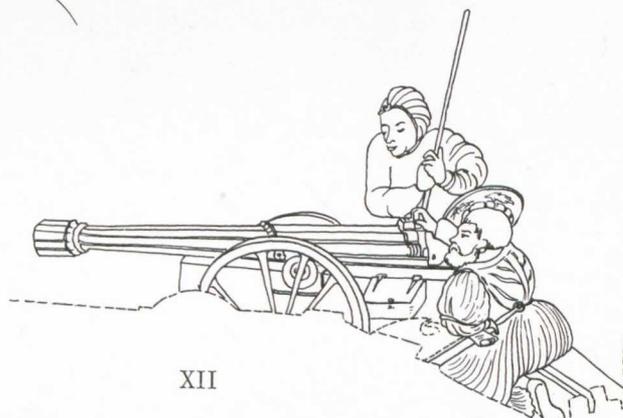
IX



X



XI



XII

IX. The band (probably Germans): Scene 19.

X. Shooting and loading: Scene 20. The chain-like objects worn by the loader are probably wooden cartridges. Note absence of coiled matchcord: these matchlocks are being used as tinderlocks, i.e. a bit of tow in the ferrule of the serpentine is set aglow from a nearby stationary fire source just before shooting.

XI. Duke Ostrogsky: Scene 22.

XII. Cannoneers (Germans?): Scene 22.

XIII. Polish-Lithuanian heavy armoured infantry: Scene 25.

XIV. Hussar charging: Scene 28.



XIII



XIV

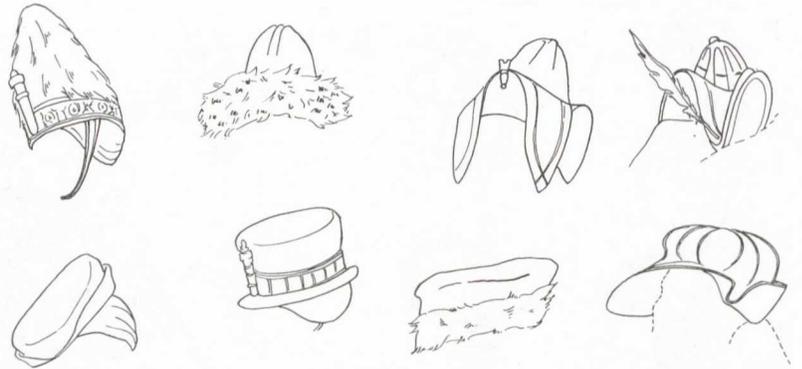
XV. Headgear of light cavalry.

XVI. Leader of Lithuanian Tartars. Scene 32.

XVII. Lithuanian Tartar. Scene 33.

XVIII. Hussar in pursuit. Scene 34.

XIX. Muscovite headgear.



XV



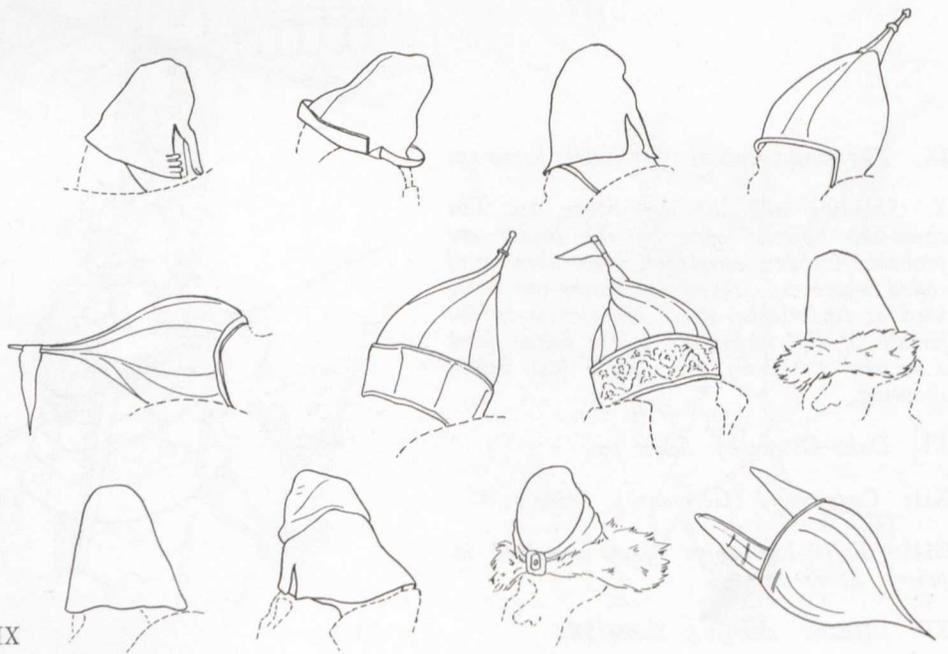
XVI



XVII



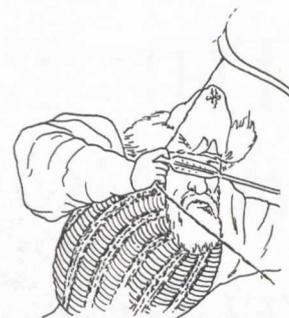
XVIII



XIX



XX



XXI



XXII

XX. Commander of the Muscovites: Scene 39.

XXI. Muscovite archer: Scene 41.

XXII. Muscovite heavy archer: Scene 44.

NOTES

- ¹ A. Schulz, "Über ein Gemälde wahrscheinlich von Georg Preu (polnische Schlacht aus dem Anfange des 16. Jh)", in *Schlesiens Vorzeit in Bild und Schrift*, III, 1877, p. 180.
J. Caro, "Die Schlacht bei Orsza, 1514 (Nach dem grossen Bilde im Museum Schlesischer Altertümer)", in *loc. cit.*, III, 1879, pp. 345-353.
- ² N.J. Holst, "Das Ereignisbild", in *Staatliche Museen-Ausstellungsfolge Deutsche Kunst seit Dürer*, No. 3, Berlin 1935.
C. Müller, "Deutsche Malerei des 16. Jh. in Schlesien", in *Schlesische Heimatspflege*, XI, Breslau 1935, p. 217.
S. Herbst and M. Walicki, "Obraz bitwy pod Orsza. Dokument historii sztuki i wojskowosci XVI w." ("The Painting 'The Battle of Orsha'. A Document of Art History and Military History of the 16th Cent."), in *Rozprawy Komisji Historii Kultury i Sztuki Towarzystwa Naukowego Warszawskiego*, Vol. 1, Warsaw, 1949, pp. 33-68.
- ³ J. Bialostocki, "Zagadka bitwy pod Orsza" ("The Puzzle of 'The Battle of Orsha'"), in *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki*, No. 1, Warsaw 1955, pp. 80-98.
- ⁴ Z. Stefanska, "Dzialo orszanskie" ("The Orsha Cannon"), in *Muzealnictwo Wojskowe*, Vol. 1, Warsaw 1959, pp. 359-66.
- ⁵ J. Bialostocki, "Czy Dürer nasladowal 'Bitwe pod Orsza'?" ("Did Dürer Borrow from 'The Battle of Orsha'?"), in *op. cit.* fn 3 supra., No. 3, 1969, pp. 276-81.
- ⁶ *Zarys dziejow wojskowosci polskiej do roku 1864 (Outline of Polish Military History to 1864)*, ed. J. Sikorski, Warsaw 1965, pp. 331-36.
- ⁷ J. Bialostocki, *op. cit.* fn. 3 supra, p. 98.
- ⁸ Z. Zygulski Jr., "The Winged Hussars of Poland", in *The Arms and Armor Annual*, ed. R. Held, Vol. 1, Digest Books, Northfield, Ill., U.S.A., 1973/4, pp. 90-103.
- ⁹ *Ustiusbskiy letopisniy svod, (A Set of Usting Annals)*, Moscow and Leningrad 1950, p. 106.